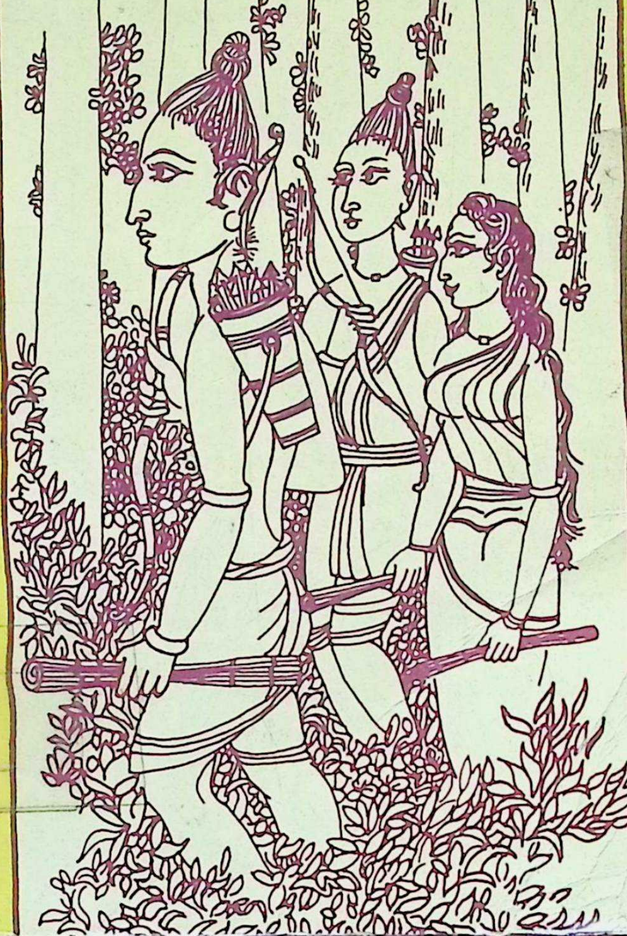
The Ramayana
of Valmiki

Condensed from Sanskrit and
Transcreated into English by P LAL



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OF
VALMIKI

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This
transcreation
is dedicated
with love
to
SITA
model
of
Indian womanhood
lady
of purity and delight
daughter
of the fragrant earth
speaker
of sweet wisdom

*

"It may take a hundred years coming,
but joy surely comes to every man."

एति जीवन्तमानन्दो नरं वर्षशतादपि ।

["Sundara-Kanda": "The Auspicious Book", 34:6]

Transcreator's Note

I am constantly asked, "Why the *Mahabharata* and the *Ramayana* in English ? What reader do you have in mind ?" The first implication is that the reader is either British or American – certainly not Indian. The second implication is that there are hordes of foreigners, culture – vultures and assorted weirdos, eager to swoop on the tiniest juicy morsels of epic exotica from India.

The truth is the other way round. I have only one reader in mind. An Indian. Myself. Others – from India preferably, and from any other part of the world if the desire so moves them – are welcome to eavesdrop. English is only the medium – the message is what matters.

Exotica is so much trivia. I am interested in human relationships, social and ethical complexities, dramatic confrontations and resolutions, historical events, myth-manifestations, tradition and ceremony and ritual and the entire range of cultural paraphernalia only insofar as they have relevance for us today and can help us, young and old, to live our lives better – by which I mean more fully, more usefully.

I am aware that Vyasa and Valmki are revered as composers of sacred texts. In this special edition for young adults I have stressed the story – without, I hope, sacrificing any material that is sacredly significant. No book can be holy or, indeed, anything else if it is not read. I have therefore tried to make the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata* readable, and, I hope, enjoyable as well as intelligently discussable. Emphasis on unpleasurable and unreasoned sanctity is the first symptom of a culture en route to self – extinction, and I do not wish to contribute to such a demise.

P LAL

Acknowledgements

My first thanks go to my wife who helped with the preparation of the introduction and provided translations from Bengali material on controversies that have gather round the *Ramayana*.

Priyamvada Devi drew with my attention to the remarkable insights in V.S. Srinivasa Sastri's *Lectures on the Ramayana* and procured for me a copy of that indispensable out-of-print volume. I have profited by discussing Valmiki's epic with her, and the rendering of "Sundara Kanda" as "The Auspicious Book" is her suggestion.

Nandini Nopany compiled the Glossary and helped with its annotation. We have tried to make the Glossary as usefully comprehensive as possible. I thank her also for proof–reading the entire text of the transcreation.

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Sri Pradip Bhattacharya, Deputy Director of the Lal Bahadur Shastri National Academy of Administration, deluged me with *Ramayana* reference books and Sanskrit recensions after inviting me to Mussoorie in October 1980 to deliver a series of lectures on Indian culture; I have tried to put some of his material to good use.

I am grateful to James Laughlin for permission to quote extracts from my introduction in *Great Sanskrit Plays in Modern Translation* (New Directions) and to Robert Antoine for extracts from *Religious Hinduism* (St Paul Publications).

Sri Bhagwati Prasad Sharma deserves special thanks for meeting impossible typing deadlines. If any religious merit resides in supplying a meticulous *Ramayana* typescript in record time, he has richly earned all of it.

Translating Vyasa and Valmiki is a humbling experience, and it is impossible to list the range and depth of one's gratitude to the tradition, to friends, and even to knowledgeable strangers, casual conversations or meetings with whom spark off new insights into the epics. These I thank unnamed, and I thank in advance all who are inspired, with sincere motives, to point out any weaknesses and inadequacies in this version and whose sympathetic criticism

helps to improve my attempt to present Valmiki in readable English to interested Indians and others in the closing quarter of the twentieth century.

P LAL

Book Five: SUNDARA-KANDA. After a phenomenal leap (later described as crossing the sea) Hanuman arrived at Lanka and found Sita in the Ashoka-vana surrounded by guards. He witnessed Ravana's visit to Sita and Ravana's futile attempt to win her favour. Hanuman revealed himself to Sita when she had been left alone, assured her of a speedy deliverance, and hurried home to his companions. (Hanuman destroyed the garden, killed some demons, and was captured by Indrajit, one of Ravana's sons. At the intercession of Vibhishana, a brother of Ravana, Hanuman was punished instead of being killed, and they set fire to the oil-saturated clothes which they had wound onto his tail. Hanuman freed himself and, jumping from roof to roof, set fire to the city of Lanka.) Finally Hanuman and his companions returned to Rama with the news that Sita had been found a captive at Lanka.

Book Six: YUDDHA-KANDA. The monkey-host began its march on Lanka and so reached the edge of the waters. Meanwhile Ravana held council. When he rejected Vibhishana's proposal to avoid war by returning Sita, Vibhishana took refuge with Rama. A bridge was built across the waters and Lanka was invaded. (Some of Ravana's spies who had been caught were sent back to Ravana. A Maya-shirsha, artificial head of Rama, was shown to Sita, but Vibhishana's daughter revealed the fraud to her.) Rama sent Angada, Sugriva's son, as ambassador to Ravana, who obstinately refused to return Sita. A long series of battles and duels followed. The chief events were : Indrajit wounded Rama and Lakshmana who lay unconscious on the battlefield bound by snake-arrows. (They were freed by Garuda.) Then Kumbhakarna, a brother of Ravana, who slept for six months and remained awake for one day, was awakened; he entered the battlefield, won a great victory, but eventually was killed by Rama. Indrajit wounded many, including Rama and Lakshmana. (Hanuman was sent to the Himalayas to fetch certain herbs and, when unable to find them, he brought the whole summit of the mountain to Lanka, returning it later. The herbs cured all the wounded.) Lanka was set on fire at night-time by the monkeys. Indrajit again entered the battlefield and decapitated an illusory Sita in order to discourage Rama, but Vibhishana revealed the fraud. Then he withdrew to Nikumbhila to perform a sacrifice that would make him invincible, but he was prevented from performing it by the monkeys, and killed by Lakshmana. Ravana wounded Lakshmana with the spear called

Shakti. (Hanuman again fetched the mountain with the herbs from the Himalayas.) The battle ended with a duel between Rama and Ravana, in which Ravana was killed. Vibhishana was crowned king in his place. (Rama called Sita into his presence and addressed hard words to her, intending to abandon her. Sita protested her innocence and asked Lakshmana to prepare a fire. She fearlessly entered the fire and was restored to Rama by the god Agni.) Rama accepted Sita and began the return journey (in the Pushpaka, aerial chariot of Ravana). Rama was crowned king of Ayodhya (where he reigned for ten thousand years and had thousands of sons). His reign, the proverbial Rama-rajya, is described in glowing terms : there was no sickness, no sorrow, no fear of wild animals or of thieves, no drought, no infant mortality. All were pious, truthful, and devoted to the practice of good works.

Book Seven : UTTARA-KANDA. (1) (The story of Ravana is related in thirty-four cantos and that of Hanuman in two cantos.) (2) The narrative of the Yuddha-Kanda is taken up, beginning from the day after Rama's coronation. (3) The repudiation of Sita is related in eleven cantos. The people blame Rama for taking Sita back into his house after she has been so long in Ravana's house. Accordingly Lakshmana is ordered to abandon her in the forest; he does so, leaving her in the vicinity of Valmiki's ashram, and here she receives shelter. (4) (Rama tells Lakshmana the *puranic* stories of Nriga, Nimi, and Yayati.) (5) Shatrughna is sent to kill the demon Lavana. On his way he spends the night at Valmiki's ashram, his visit coinciding with Sita's delivery of twins, both boys. He proceeds on his way, kills Lavana, and founds the city of Madhupura. Twelve years later he returns to Ayodhya, stops again at Valmiki's ashram, and there he hears the twins recite the *Ramayana*. (6) (A Brahmin's son dies at a young age; Narada reveals the cause of this death; a low-caste Shudra. Shambuka by name, was practising asceticism contrary to caste rules, so Rama goes and kills him.) (7) Then Rama's Horse Sacrifice is related. Valmiki and the twins Kusha and Lava attend this, and the boys sing the *Ramayana* before the assembly. When Rama learns that they are the sons of Sita, he tells Valmiki to fetch Sita so that she might take a solemn oath before all the people and be purified. Sita comes and takes the famous oath: "Swallow me up, earth goddess, if I have never thought of any but Rama; swallow me up, earth goddess, if I have worshipped Rama in thought, word, and deed; swallow me up, earth goddess, if it is true that I have known none but Rama." The earth opens and receives Sita. On the following day, the boys sing the last part of the Uttara-Kanda. (8) Then the conquests of the sons of Lakshmana and Bharata are narrated. Lakshmana's tragic death is followed by the description of Kusha's settling at Kushvati and Lava's settling at Sravasti. Finally, Rama, Bharata, Shatrughna and the citizens of Ayodhya leave the city and go in procession to the river Sarayu. There Rama and his brothers enter bodily into the Vishnu form. The citizens abandon their bodies to the river and acquire heaven.

3. CONTROVERSIES AROUND THE RAMAYANA

There are four major areas of scholarly debate.

(1) *Date of composition.* No one really knows, but one could hazard a guess anywhere between 1500 B.C. to 200 B.C. A Press Trust of India report, carried by the Bengali daily *Ananda Bazar Patrika* on 24 December 1980, said: "When was the *Ramayana* composed? If the research done by an Ahmedabad scholar of geology can be relied upon, the *Ramayana* cannot be more than 2,800 years old. The city of Shringaverapura, mentioned in the *Ramayana* and situated between Uttar Pradesh and the Punjab, was excavated recently and a dating of its radio-carbon has helped scholars to arrive at this conclusion. They have presented their opinion in a report submitted to the Archaeological Survey of India. Their spokesman expressed the view that if the specimens gathered from the ruins were genuine and had remained intact through the ages, it was clear that the *Ramayana* could not have been written before 8000 B.C."

There seems to be tenuous agreement on the theory that the oral *Ramayana* story was current from 800 B.C. onwards and sometime during the 2nd century B.C. to 2nd century A.D. it was written down and "given a Brahminical tone throughout which was not characteristic of the original work". Even this is a hazardous consensus.

(2) *Where is Lanka?* On the map, it is obviously Sri Lanka or the pear-shaped island of Ceylon at the southern tip of the Indian peninsula. The popular Indian imagination refuses to entertain any other possibility. Yet an influential Marxist group of scholars, perturbed by the fanciful exploits of Hanuman and certain discrepancies in Valmiki's descriptions of the landscape and scenery, feel that Lanka was located somewhere in central India

and that Hanuman did not cross any sea or build any bridge across the strait; there was apparently only a shallow lake serving as moat to Lanka and the agile aboriginals, led by Hanuman, manoeuvred a hop-skip-and-jump through it.

(3) *Is Rama an avatara of Vishnu?* If so, why does he order the nose-mutilation of Shurpanakha? Why does he, as some critics point out, shabbily kill Vali? Why does he pass Sita through the humiliating fire-test?

In a note on the Shurpanakha episode in his version of the *Ramayana*, C. Rajagopalachari expressed misgivings over the attitude of "some people who pose as critics of our holy books and traditions." These fault-finders apparently say that Rama "killed a woman (Tataka). He insulted and injured a woman who offered him her love. He killed Vali from behind, rather than face him and accept honourable defeat. He unjustly banished Sita to the forest at the end of all the adventures. If the banishment of Sita was not unjust and if he rightly suspected Sita's fidelity, why then, we too must suspect her fidelity."

Rajagopalachari consoled himself by arguing that all such criticism is "based on a mentality of hatred. We have unfortunately plenty of barren, heartless cleverness, devoid of understanding. Let those who find faults in Rama see faults, and if these critics faultlessly pursue dharma and avoid in their own lives the flaws they discover in Rama, the *bhaktas* of Sri Rama will indeed welcome it with joy. If they exhibit the virtues of Rama and add to these more virtues and greater flawlessness, who can complain?"

How, then, does one "explain" the un-avatara-like behaviour of Rama towards Tataka, Shurpanakha, and Vali? The believing don't need an explanation; the disbelieving are always up to specialised mischief, anyway. It's best to leave the faithful to their *bhajans*, and the sceptical to their critical editions.

When all is said and done, however, one ghost refuses to rest, especially in our half-century, in the age of Women's Lib. Rama's treatment of Sita has bewildered and disturbed even the devoutest of the devout, and it is ridiculous to close one's eyes to it.

An Indian lady whose culture and practical wisdom I admire, and whose bhakti for the divinity of Rama I respect, confessed to me once that she could understand and "excuse" all that Rama did to Sita – even the public fire-ordeal through which he made her pass – but what she could never justify was the way in which he repudiated and banished her to the forest during her pregnancy." Not one word from him! Surely it couldn't be that he thought Sīta would refuse. As a good Hindu wife, the ideal *sadharmacharini,* surely she would have understood and agreed to anything he wished. Yet he ordered Lakshmana to abandon her, helpless, in the wilderness, though he knew she was pregnant. How can anyone's heart become so hardened?"

(4) "*Why does Rama kill Shambuka?* I will let the reader decide this for himself – the brief episode is transcreated in its entirety in the last book, the "Uttara-Kanda". It is not a pleasant episode – and no one has offered an acceptable rational interpretation yet.

4. TRANSLATING THE RAMAYANA

I have followed the same principles for transcreating the *Ramayana* as I adopted for my condensed rendering of the *Mahabharata.* First, I have kept the spirit of the contemporary age very much in mind, because I strongly believe that a translator speaks only to his contemporaries, unlike the creative writer who may speak to succeeding ages as well; every text of high imagination deserves to be freshly translated for every generation. The reader I have in mind is the English-educated Indian who, for one reason or other, has lost touch with the roots of his tradition and wishes to re-establish contact with his culture with the help of English; any others who are interested I classify as friendly eavesdroppers; they are welcome to enjoy the show but the performance was not really intended for their pleasure.

Secondly, I have stressed the dramatic elements in Valmiki's narrative, specially those episodes that bring out subtleties of character. I have not ventured into the epic with any bias – historical, literary, or religious – but I have certainly stressed its psychological aspects, and tried to communicate the exquisite quality of pathos that Sanskrit rhetoricians call the *karuna rasa* and which appears to me to be the essence of the *Ramayana.*

Thirdly, I have treated the epic as an oral-culture experience, and tried to use an idiom that has a *spoken,* immediate impact. I am antipathetic to all versions of the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata* that treat them as elaborate print-culture texts and try to convey their literary flavour by resorting to archaisms, prolixities, and complicated tropes of all kinds.

Finally, I have tried to retain the "epiphany-point" of the epic.

"These are passages, usually not over-long, that are embedded in every major epic of the world, where the narrative seems to miraculously lift into a sudden experience of the unsaid and almost unsayable mystery of human relationship, or where it bursts into an ecstatic celebration of some spiritual discovery, or where it describes with memorable lyricism some unsuspected exquisiteness of the beauty of nature." The *Ramayaṇa* is filled with examples of the last, which is why I have allowed three-fourths of my transcreation to flow as free verse.

Contents

PROLOGUE 1

Book One – *BALA-KANDA*
(Childhood) 4

Book Two – *AYODHYA-KANDA*
(The City of Ayodhya) 18

Book Three – *ARANYA-KANDA*
(The Forest) 50

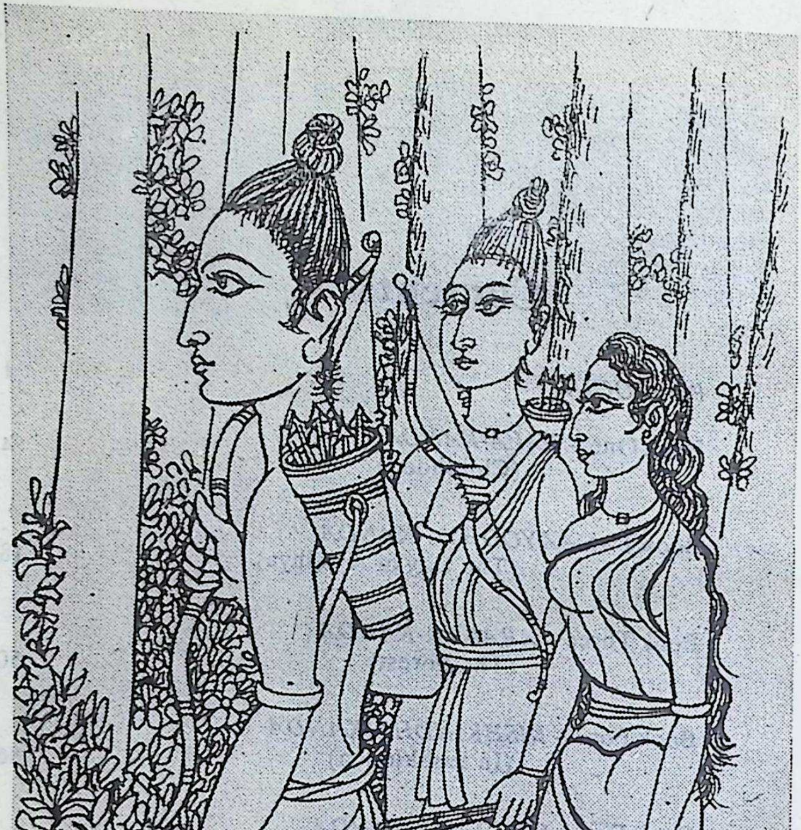
Book Four – *KISHKINDHA-KANDA*
(In Kishkindha) 86

Book Five – *SUNDARA-KANDA*
(The Auspicious Book) 99

Book Six – *YUDDHA-KANDA*
(War) 121

Book Seven – *UTTARA-KANDA*
(Aftermath) 161

GLOSSARY 187



Prologue

Once, not far from the river Tamasa,
The ascetic Valmiki was wandering in a forest,
Meditating on the beauty of nature.
Nearby, unafraid,
Two sweet-voiced krauncha *birds were mating,*
Savouring the delights of spontaneous love.
An ill-minded fowler of the Nishada tribe,
With deliberate malice,
In Valmiki's presence,
Killed the male bird.
Pierced by an arrow in the act of love,
The pink-tufted crane, wings outspread,
Toppled.
Wrenched from under her lover,
The female, seeing blood gush out,
Screamed.
She screamed piteously.
Compassion stirred in Valmiki's heart
When he saw the bird die.
More compassion stirred in him
When he heard the screams of the female.
Horrified by the act of adharma,
He cursed the fowler:

> *"Fowler! Listen to my words.*
> *May peace of mind never be yours,*
> *For you have killed this innocent bird*
> *In his act of innocent love."*

Even as the words issued from his mouth,
He felt uneasy, and he thought:
What is this that I have said
In the intensity of my grief?

For some time
Wise Valmiki brooded;
Then, turning to his disciple Bharadvaja,
He said:

> *"Four lines of eight syllables each!*
> *From my sorrow came this song.*
> *From* shoka *comes* shloka:
> *There is no poetry without compassion."*

Instantly, joyfully,
Bharadvaja memorised the shloka.
Valmiki was pleased.
Having bathed in the sacred river,
Valmiki returned to his ashram.
Carrying a lota *of water,*
Bharadvaja followed his guru.
Wise-in-dharma Valmiki discussed various topics
With his disciple,
After which he relapsed into meditation.

It was then
That Brahma, four-faced Creator of the worlds,
Radiant, Self-Born Divinity,
Appeared before Valmiki.
Surprised and speechless,
Valmiki rose quickly, and humbly
Stood there, with palms joined in anjali.
He offered puja
And provided water to wash hands and feet;
He brought a seat for the Lord.
Bhagavan Brahma made himself comfortable,
And motioned Rishi *Valmiki to sit down.*
Valmiki obeyed, absent-mindedly.
Though the Creator of the worlds was facing him,
Valmiki slipped into a reverie,
His mind focused on the fowler's crime.
It was a cruel deed, *he was thinking,*
A wicked deed to kill a sweet-voiced crane
In his innocent love-making.
He recalled the grief of the female
And, repeating the shloka *in front of Brahma,*

He pondered its meaning,
And the poignance was too much,
And once again sorrow overcame him.

Brahma smiled and said to Valmiki:
"May this shloka *bring you glory!*
There is no need to brood, O great Rishi.
The poetry that flowed from your lips
Was inspired by me.
The time is now ripe for you
To narrate to the world
The story of Rama, excelling Lord of dharma.
Narrate the known and the unknown deeds

    of wise Rama
    of Sumitra's son Lakshmana
    of Sita
    and of the rakshasas.

You will be inspired, great Rishi!
The unknown will be opened to you,
All will be revealed to you.
Nothing you say in your poem will be untrue.
Sing then the sacred song
Of the enchanting exploits of Rama.
So long as the mountains and rivers of this earth
    stay on the face of the earth,
So long will the story of Rama endure,
    so long will your fame remain
In the realms of heaven above
    and the kingdoms of earth below."

BOOK ONE

Bala - Kanda

CHILDHOOD

Around the banks of the river Sarayu was the kingdom of Kosala, a prosperous land filled with happy people. Its capital was Ayodhya, a world-honoured city, founded by illustrious Manu, one of the primeval lords of mankind.

A splendid city, with massive gates and well-stocked markets, excellently fortified and guarded. Bards, folk singers, professional musicans ... glittering mansions of the wealthy ... exquisite gardens and mango groves ... stately trees encircling its outskirts, breath taking beautiful ... elephants, horses, camels... lovely, bejewelled ladies moving in groups on its chessboard-patterned streets... everywhere the harmonious sound of trumpets, kettledrums, *vinas,* and temple bells... a city of surpassing splendour.

The ruler of Ayodhya was King Dasharatha, who was wise in the Vedas and devoted to dharma. A farsighed monarch, loved by his subjects, a powerful chariot-hero, self-disciplined, truth-cherishing.

The citizens of Ayodhya were intelligent, contented, prosperous (all were well-to-do, possessing grain, cattle, horses), and followers of dharma. None swindled, none was stingy, none mean, none arrogant, none an atheist. The ladies wore gold necklaces and earrings, and used sandalpaste and scent on their bodies. Heroic and experienced warriors patrolled the city, like lions guarding mountain caves.

The ministers of this mahatma ruler were exceptionally qualified : unswervingly loyal, they were shrewd psychologists, and placed each problem in its proper perspective.

But the mahatma ruler, so wise in the ways of dharma, so generous and just, had no son. And this was a cause of great sorrow to him. It came to his mind one day: *Why don't I perform a Horse Sacrifice to obtain a son?*

Vasishtha and the other Brahmins were unanimous in their approval. "An excellent plan. First, sire, the site of sacrifice should be selected on the northern bank of the Sarayu." Dasharatha did as instructed; then, summoning the learned Brahmins and other scholars, he said, "I have decided to perform the Horse Sacrifice with the help of Rishyashringa. I do so in order to fulfil my desire to have an heir."

"This is an act of dharma. You will surely have more than one son; you will have four splendid sons," they replied and set about collecting the materials and completing the preliminaries for the sacrifice.

Next year, with the return of another spring, Dasharatha approached Vasishtha, offered him respectful puja, and said humbly: "Holy one, you are my guru, you seek my welfare, you love me deeply. I request you to conduct the sacrifice as enjoined in the scriptures. Let no efforts be spared to achieve ritual perfection."

Vasishtha replied, "It will be done."

Vasishtha speedily summoned elderly and other Brahmins experienced in ritual observances and details of sacrificial architecture. He engaged artists, carpenters, astrologers, artisans, mathematical experts, experts in singing and dancing, pure-minded scholars of the scriptures, and other professionals and all-rounders. "Let the great work start!" he said to them. "Brick mansions, stocked with every convenience and variety of food, to please the tastes of royal and other guests; elaborate dwellings for visitors from abroad; stables for horses, shelters for elephants, rooms for soldiers from remote lands....Show correct respect and offer generous hospitality to each caste as it deserves. Let there be no taint of anger, selfishness, or lust. Work as a team. Specialists and menials, artisans and labourers—let all hearts unite in the fulfilment of a giant task."

Serpents, birds, turtles and other creatures, as ordained in the scriptures, were tied to the pillars—three hundred of them—as sacrificial victims. Among them was the priceless gem, Raja Dasharatha's own horse.

Queen Kaushalya circled and consecrated the horse with three strokes of a sword. She served the horse's head. The priests then said to the sin-cleansed king, "Sire, only you can protect this vast earth. We are scholars in the Vedas; the earth holds no attraction for us, and we know little of how to attend to worldly matters. If it pleases your majesty, grant us anything – gems, gold, cows – but nothing involving overlordship of the earth."

The king gifted them ten thousand cows, ten crores of gold coins, and four times that many silver coins; they handed over the wealth to Rishyashringa and Vasishtha, who distributed it equally among the deserving.

Having successfully completed the difficult Horse Sacrifice, Raja Dasharatha said to Rishyashringa: "Strict-vowed sage, the welfare of my race is in your hands."

"You will have four sons," replied the Brahmin, "to perpetuate the glory of your dynasty."

The mahatma king, pleased with the sweet words of Rishyashringa, joyfully did obeisance and continued the conversation.

Then Rishyashringa performed the Putreshti sacrifice, chanting Vedic mantras. The gods, led by Brahma, appeared. Brahma reflected: *Ravana's request was "Neither gandharvas, nor gods, nor rakshasas nor yakshas will be able to destroy me"; that request was granted. He thought man too trivial and left him out. A way must be found to destroy Ravana.*

Lord Vishnu appeared, dressed in saffron, carrying conch, discus, and mace, shining like the dazzling sun. The gods propitiated him :

"*Vishnu, lord, listen to our prayer!*
Save mankind from the ravages of Ravana!"

All-knowing Vishnu received the homage of the gods, and asked, "How can the ruler of the rakshasas be killed?"

Unanimously, the gods replied, "Become a human *avatara,* O Lord Vishnu, and kill him in battle!"

The sacrifice completed, Rishyashringa and his wife Shanta, escorted by Dasharatha for a part of the distance, left for his city.

Six seasons passed. It was in the twelfth month, on the ninth lunar day of the bright fortnight of Chatira that the eldest wife of Dasharatha, Kaushalya, gave birth to Rama, the universally honoured lord of the worlds, the glory of the Ikshvaku dynasty, the auspiciously marked one, with pink-rimmed eyes, long arms, red lips, and a voice as richly mellow as the sound of a kettledrum. His radiance added to the loveliness of Kaushalya, as Indra's radiance enhanced the beauty of Aditi.

The youngest wife of Dasharatha, Kaikeyi, gave birth to Bharata, who possessed a quarter of the glory of Vishnu and his virtues.

To Sumitra, the second wife of Dasharatha, were born the twins Shatrughna and Lakshmana, expert in the use of weapons, and possessing one quarter of the glory of Vishnu.

The four mahatma sons of Dasharatha were handsome, filled with all virtues, and shining like the stars in the four quarters.

The gandharvas sang,
And apsaras danced,
Divine drums sounded,
And flowers fell from the sky,
And the streets of the capital
Were crowded with actors and dancers,
And the citizens celebrated
With merrymaking and music-making.

Gentle and humble, devoted to the study of the Vedas, skilled in archery, the children grew up in the palace. Raja Dasharatha, mahatma of dharma, began discussing their marriage with his family priests and ministers. It was during the course of one such discussion that the great sage Vishvamitra arrived unannounced and said to the palace door-keepers, "Send word to the king that Vishvamitra, son of Gadhi, is here."

Raja Dasharatha received him with reverence, saying:

"Like nectar,
Like rain in a desert,
Like the birth of a son by a good wife
to an heirless man,
Like wealth recovered that one had thought
lost for ever,
Is your arrival, O great sage!
I am blessed by your presence.
You have visited me:
My life is fulfilled at last!
You who were once Kshatriya
Became Brahmin by the strength of your penance.
You do me great honour today.
What is your desire, noble one?

You are like a god to me –
What service can I lay at your feet?"

Vishwamitra replied, "Sire, I have resolved to perform a sacrifice to achieve my spiritual aims. Two rakshasas are bent on frustrating me. They can assume any form they like. Their names are Maricha and Sabahu; they are strong, they are vicious; they are always polluting my altar with blood-dripping marrow. I cannot curse them, for a curse would defile the sacrifice. Lend me the services of your son, sire; let me have Rama, the brave one whose side-locks curve like crow's-wings over his ears; I will protect him, and he will kill the rakshasas. Let me have lotus-eyed Rama by my side for the ten nights of the sacrifice. Be gracious and let my sacrifice proceed as planned. May you prosper, Sire !"

Dasharatha trembled and felt faint. He steadied himself. The words of Vishvamitra pained him. "My lotus-eyed Rama is not yet sixteen. How can he fight rakshasas ? He is a child; he has no experience of actual combat; he does not know how to gauge the strength or weakness of an enemy. You know, great sage, how cunning and heinous rakshasas are. Tell me, who are these two you mention, and how powerful are they? Is it not possible for me and my army to overcome them?"

"Sire," replied Vishvamitra," it is really Ravana who is behind this. He is descended from the sage Pulastya, one of nine mind-born sons of Brahma. He is incredibly powerful. He is assisted by a horde of rakshasas. He is Vishravas' son and Kubera's half-brother. He does not himself interfere with what he considers petty sacrifices, but deputes two mighty rakshasas, Maricha and Subahu, to do the mischief for him."

Raja Dasharatha listened carefully and said,"If gods, gandharvas, anti-gods, yakshas, birds and reptiles cannot defeat Ravana, as you imply, how can a mortal do so? How can I give you my inexperienced sons? What chance has he against the sons of Sunda and Upasunda? I refuse. Let me face them in single combat. Or let my relatives do so. But not my son."

Vishvamitra heard the father's concern for the welfare of his son, and a fierce anger seized him. "You promised to serve me, and now you go back on your word! Is this action worthy of a Raghava? So be it, then: I will return. Your words have no value. Keep them. Be happy with them – and may your friends be happy with you."

The earth shook; even the gods were afraid. The patient sage Vasishtha suggested to the king, "You are an Ikshvaku, Sire. You are the very personification of dharma. You cannot abandon dharma. You are honoured in the three worlds; as the soul of dharma. You have given your word; you must keep it. Let holy Vishvamitra have Rama. If Vishvamitra so wished, he could have routed the rakshasas himself. But he seeks to enhance the glory of your son. That is why he appeals to you."

The advice of Vasishtha restored reason to the mind of Dasharatha. Calling Rama and Lakshmana to the court, Dasharatha affectionately smelt the heads of his eldest son and Lakshmana, and entrusted both to the care of Vishvamitra. Vishvamitra walked ahead; behind him came Rama, bow in hand, with crow's-wing locks of hair curving over and covering his ears; and behind Rama came Lakshmana.

Twelve miles from the capital, along the southern bank of the Sarayu, Vishvamitra turned to Rama and said gently, "Sip this water, my child. We have no time to lose. Let me quickly instruct you and Lakshmana in the mantras known as Bala and Atibala. After you have uttered them, you will never feel fatigue, disease, or age. No one will be your equal in the three worlds. In wisdom, skill and good fortune, you will be unrivalled."

Sipping the water as instructed, Rama received the mantras from the great rishi. He shone with the dazzle of the thousand-rayed autumnal sun. The three passed the night happily on the bank of the Sarayu. The two princes slept on a lowly bed of grass, swathed in the sweet words of Vishvamitra on that exquisitely peaceful night.

Next morning, early at dawn the two brothers performed their devotions and followed Vishvamitra to the bank of the Ganga. The mahatma sages of the ashram accompanied them and showed them a splendid boat, saying, "Hurry and board this boat and continue your auspicious journey." Offering respectful puja to the sages, Vishvamitra and the two brothers crossed the Ganga. Midriver, Rama and Lakshmana heard wave thudding on wave, and asked, "Why is there so much noise, holy one ?"

Vishvamitra replied:

"Rama,
On Mount Kailasa is Manasa,
The lake of the mind,

Born of the creative imagination of Brahma.
The river Sarayu, rising in Manasa,
Flows through Ayodhya.
Here it meets the Ganga,
And the clash of their waters
Is the sound you have heard.
Pay homage here, Rama,
With deep meditation."

The brothers genuflected. Reaching the southern bank, they left the boat and traversed swiftly ahead on foot. In front of them loomed a fierce, desolate forest. Rama turned to Vishvamitra and asked:

"*Holy one,*
This dark and fearful forest,
With crickets chirping and beasts roaring,
And vultures and other birds screaming,
Filled with boars, lions, tigers and elephants,
With trees of all kinds –
Dhava, ashvakarna, kakubha, bilva,
Patala, tinduka, *and* jujube –
This is a forest
Of insidious and shuddering enchantment."

"Yes," replied the great ascetic Vishvamitra, "Listen, my child, and I will tell you something about this forest. A long time ago there used to be two cities here – Malada and Karusha – two prosperous cities created by the gods. A wicked Yakshini called Tataka was born here. She could take any form she liked and she had the strength of a thousand elephants. Free this territory of the thorn of Tataka ! I command you to do so. As long as this ogress lives, no one has the courage to enter this forest."

Rama lifted his bow and twanged the string; the four quarters reverberated with the noise. It stunned and confused Tataka. Bewildered and enraged, she rushed angrily in the direction of the sound. Rama saw the grotesque giant Yakshini bearing down on him, and he said to Lakshmana:

"*Lakshmana, what a disgusting monster !*
A coward would collapse seeing her !
I shall slice off her nose and ears.
It will not be easy,

For she knows the magic of maya.
I will spare her life,
For she is a woman, after all.
But I will immobilise her,
And render her harmless."

Even as he was saying this, the gruesome figure of Tataka, shrieking and howling, towered over him with upraised arms.

Vishvamitra blocked her with a mantra "*Hun!*", and shouted, "*Jaya Rama!*"

Tataka resorted to maya and scattered a shower of rocks on the two brothers. Rama, angered, disintegrated the rock-swarm. She lunged at him. He cut off both her arms. Lakshmana sliced off the ears and nose of the writhing monster. She assumed one form after another in a desperate bid to escape; she tried to enchant and mesmerise the princes with lovely shapes; she became invisible, briefly bewildering Rama and Lakshmana. She lumbered around wildly, hurling huge rocks at them.

"Enough of mercy, Rama!" advised Vishvamitra. "Kill her – and kill her now! For if you don't, she will use her maya to redouble her strength, and start despoiling our sacred rituals again. Twilight is gaining on us – and rakshasas become immune at twilight. Descendant of Raghu, there is no time to waste!"

Rama selected from his quiver special arrows sensitive to sound and fired them at the Yakshini. Employing all the wiles of her maya, roaring with rage, she rushed at Rama and Lakshmana through the cluster of arrows like an irresistible thunderbolt. Rama stopped her with a single shaft; it pierced her breast; she fell down, dead.

And immediately Indra and the other gods praised the feat of Rama with shouts of "*Sadhu! Sadhu!* Excellent! Excellent!"

They rested that night in the forest and, next morning, Vishvamitra, similing, praised Rama. "I am happy with you, brave prince. May you prosper! I will give you weapons with which you will be able to rout gods, anti-gods, gandharvas, and nagas. These are divine weapons, Rama. Accept them."

Rama received the weapons, and gratefully said to radiant Vishvamitra, "Revered one, finest of sages, these weapons will make me invincible even against the gods. Instruct me further in the secrets of their discharge and recall." And Vishvamitra taught the two brothers the use of mantras for release and return of these special missiles.

Following Vishvamitra, the two brothers travelled in a north-easterly direction till they arrived at the site of King Janaka's sacrificial altar. Rama said, "What a magnificent *yajna!* - Thousands of Brahmins from different parts of the country, all wise in the Vedas! Hundreds of carts carrying their belongings and the necessaries for the sacrifice! Let us rest here for a while, holy one."

King Janaka received them with great respect and courtesy and, with palms joined in *anjali,* said to Vishvamitra, "Holy sir, please be seated along with the other great sages present here."

Questioned by Mahatma Janaka, Vishvamitra introduced the two young men as sons of Dasharatha; he gave an account of their arduous journey and stay in the Siddha ashram, their destruction of rakshasas, their meeting with Ahalya and conversation with Gautama, and their visit to Mithila with the purpose of examining the great bow. Having said all this to Mahatma Janaka, *Maha-muni* Vishvamitra was silent.

Strict-vowed Shatananda, the eldest son of Gautama, rejoiced when he heard of the feats of Rama.

"You are welcome, O finest of men." he said to Rama, "it is our great good fortune that you have come to us with the illustrious Vishvamitra, who is the son of the great Kushika. Let me tell you the story of Vishvamitra.

"Vishvamitra, of Kshatriya birth, observed strict vows for one thousand years. The gods, impressed, came to reward him with the fruits of his *tapasya.* Extraordinarily radiant Brahma praised him, 'May you prosper! May you become a *rishi* as a result of your discipline.'

Brahma said this and returned to heaven. Vishvamitra continued his marvellous *tapasya* with even greater devotion.

"A long time passed, and the most ravishing *apsara* of all, Menaka, came one day to bathe in the Pushkara lake.

"Kushika's son Vishvamitra saw Menaka: she was bewitchingly beautiful, like lightning flashing in dark-blue cloud.

"Pierced by the arrows of the god of love, 'Welcome to my ashram, O *apsara,*' Vishvamitra said to Menaka. 'Be loving to me, for I love you.'

"Enchanting Menaka stayed in the ashram with Vishvamitra; her presence there frustrated much of his strict *tapasya.* Five years passed in this manner; then another five, with Menaka happy, living in Vishvamitra's ashram.

"But *Maha-muni* Vishvamitra felt ashamed about the relationship; it worried him. After ten tears it occurred to him that he had fallen victim to a plot by the gods to cancel the surpassing excellence of his penances.

"He thought: *Ten years! And they have passed like a day and a night. I have become a slave to my lust. My discipline is destroyed!*

"Remorse-stricken, he brooded, distressed and paralysed, not knowing what to do.

"He noticed Menaka trembling with fear in front of him; her palms were joined in *anjali;* gently but firmly he asked her to leave.

"Determined to be celibate all his life in order to have purity of character by mastery over passions, Vishvamitra journeyed to the bank of the Kaushiki river. He practised the most mortifying austerities for a thousand years. The gods were aghast seeing the holy ascetic locked in absolute meditation on a mountain in the north.

"They approached Brahma, Grandsire of the worlds, and supplicated: 'Grant the title of Maharshi to Vishvamitra!'

"Brahma said to Vishvamitra, 'You have not yet mastered your passions. Try harder, excellent ascetic.'

"Vishvamitra, excelling in ascetic powers, stood alone, hands upraised, subsisting on air, for a thousand years. In the summer season, he was surrounded by the four fires of the four quarters of the earth and the fifth fire of the sun overhead; in winter, he remained standing in water night and day while the rains fell on his head.

"The austerities so agitated the gods that Indra went to the *apsara* Rambha and said, 'Rambha, help the gods. Stir lust in Vishvamitra and nullify his *tapasya*. This magnificent mission I entrust to you.'

"Rambha, fearful, plams joined in *anjali,* replied, 'His temper is fatal. He will curse me. I am afraid. Forgive me, lord. Have pity on me.'

"Indra saw her apprehensive and trembling; the thousand-eyed god assured her, 'Do not fear, Rambha. You will succeed. Do as I say. I will become a sweetly-singing *kokila* and be near you when trees flower in spring time and the god of love reigns in the world. You are supremely seductive. It is not possible for Vishvamitra to resist you.'

"Agreeing, Rambha, most exquisite of *apsaras*, smiling sweetly, approached Vishvamitra. He heard the song of the *kokila*, and he gazed at the *apsara*, fascinated. A faint suspicion rose in his mind at the surpassing sweetness of the song and the unparalleled loveliness of the lady. *It must be the mischief-making mind of Indra*, he thought, and angrily he cursed Rambha:

"*Rambha,*
You knew I was fighting lust and anger,
You dared to seduce me!
Become a stone for ten thousand years,
Foolish woman!
—Until such time as the Brahmin Vasishtha
Redeems your from you punishment.'

"Immediately, Vishvamitra regretted his words, realising how anger had again wiped out the fruits of his penance.

"Rambha was transformed into a rock and Indra fled.

"Vishvamitra then resolved:

" '*No more!*
Never more!
Never more will I lose my temper!
Never more will I speak an angry word!
I will chasten and subdue myself!
I shall control my breathing for hundreds of years!
I will become a Brahmin!
I will not breathe, I will not eat,
I will stand firm.
I will be firm!
I will not allow my limbs to decay!' "

Next day, in the clear light of dawn, King Janaka sent for Mahatma Vishvamitra and the two princes. He greeted them as recommended in the scriptures, and said, "This is the great bow. There is a story behind its lying here."

"Once upon a time," continued Janaka, " there was king named Devavrata. The gods left this bow in his charge. It so happened that Shiva's father-in-law Daksha was performing a great *yajna* once; Shiva picked up this bow in order to frustrate the sacrifice and warned the assembled gods, 'You have forgotten to set aside my share of the sacrificial offerings. You have been warned, celestial ones! I will slice off your dazzling limbs with the help of this bow!"

"The gods pleaded with Shiva, and he was conciliated. He handed over the bow to the mahatma gods, and they in turn left it in trust with my illustrious ancestor Devavrata.

"I was ploughing the sacrificial field one day. Imagine my surprise when my ploughshare uncovered a baby. I adopted her after naming her 'Sita'or the 'Furrow'. My daughter is not a womb-born child. When the time for her marriage approached, I made it clear that I was looking for a royal suitor of exceptional valour. I refused to give her away to any ordinary prince. Many kings have come here; all have been shown the bow of Shiva; all have tried, but none as yet has succeeded in so much as lifting it. The question of bending and stringing it does not arise."

Maha muni Vishvamitra said quickly, "Let the bow be placed before Rama."

Janaka ordered the bow brought. It required five hundred tall and powerful cart-pullers to draw the eight-wheeled vehicle on which the chest containing the bow was lying.

With plams joined in *anjali*, Janaka said to Vishvamitra and the two princes, "Here is the bow, which is venerated by the kings of our dynasty though none has succeeded in bending it. The gods, anit-gods, rakshasas, gandharvas, yakshas, and nagas have failed also. How will a mere mortal succeed in bending and stringing it? But here it is, excellent ascetic. Let the two princes examine it."

Vishvamitra turned to the Raghava prince Rama and said, "Rama, child, what do you think?"

Rama opened the chest, looked at the bow, and replied, "It is a divine bow, excellently made. I will run my finger on it. Yes, I will lift it and bend it."

"Splendid!" said the raja and the *muni*.

With Vishvamitra's approval, Rama, as if playing a game, jerked the bow up and strung it in front of thousands of spectators. He continued to bend it to breaking point.

With a crash of thunder, like a mountain cracking apart, it snapped. Stunned by the reverberating noise, all the people, except Vishvamitra, the king, and the two princes, fell on the ground.

At the auspicious hour called the Vijaya, propitious for a wedding, Rama and his brothers dressed for the nuptials. The sage Vasishtha said to Janaka, king of the Videhas, "Sire Raja

Dasharatha, with his sons, is waiting for the one who will give away his daughters. For such is the custom – gifts are possible only with the mutual consent of giver and receiver. This is your dharma. Let the auspicious nuptials begin."

Radiantly powerful Janaka in response to Mahatma Vasishtha, said aloud to Dasharatha, "Who stands as guardian of my door? Whose permission does the royal guest require? This kingdom is yours. Why should you hesitate to step inside your own house? My daughters wait near the sacred fire like flickering flames. Let the ceremony commence. I am eager to start. Let there be no more delay."

Dasharatha escorted his sons into the wedding pavilion.

After the offerings to Agni, he escorted Sita, dazzling with jewels, to the sacred fire and seated her opposite Rama.

Raja Janaka said to Rama, "This is my daughter Sita, now your life-partner in dharma. Take her hand in yours, and accept her. May both of you prosper. She is a lady of good fortune. She will be devoted to you, as faithful as a shadow."

To the chanting of mantras, Raja Janaka poured the water in palm of his hand into Rama's palm.

There was a rain of flowers from the sky; divine drums sounded; the gods and celestial sages exclaimed, "*Sadhu! Sadhu!* Excellent! Excellent!"

After bestowing his daughter Sita, Raja Janaka said to Lakshmana, "Come, Lakshmana. May you prosper too. I give you Urmila. Accept her. The time is auspicious; let there be no delay."

Then Janaka said to Bharata, "Descendant of Raghu, take the hand of Mandavi in yours."

Next, to Shatrughna, "Mighty-armed prince, take the hand of Shrutakirti in yours."

To all of them he said, "Heroes all of you – who are gentle and disciplined – these girls will now be your wives. The time is auspicious; let the marriage ceremony be solemnised."

The four mahatma brothers, clasping the hands of the four princesses, circled the sacred fire, the raja and the *rishis,* in accordance with the rites of the traditional scriptures.

So they were married.
And kettledrums sounded.
And there was music and chanting.
And flowers fell from the sky.

Apsaras *danced and gandharvas sang.*
Such a muster of marvels!
While the music played,
The Raghava princes thrice circled the sacred fire;
And escorted their wives to their tents.
Raja Janaka, his relatives, and the rishis
Watched them retire;
Then they retired too.

How Rama loved Sita!
He was grateful to his father
For choosing such a wife.
He loved her for she was lovely,
He loved her for she was virtuous.
She loved him for he was handsome,
She loved him for he was good.
He was the lord of her heart.
Sita,
Princess of Mithila, daughter of Janaka,
Gracious as a goddess, as striking as Shri,
Lady of Lakshmi-like-loveliness,
Could read the mind of Rama
As clearly as her own.
He loved her completely:
Completely she loved him.
Son of the royal sage Dasharatha,
Rama was happy;
He shone with joy,
As Vishnu, lord of the gods, shines
In the company of his consort Shri.

BOOK TWO

Ayodhya Kanda

THE CITY OF AYODHYA

Raja Dasharatha loved his four sons
As if they were four arms of his body.
But Rama he loved specially,
Rama was as glorious as Self-Born Brahma.
Rama was divine Vishnu
Incarnated as man to destroy Ravana.
Kaushalya shone with the glory of her son,
As Aditi shines with hers,
Thunder-wielding Indra.
Rama was handsome
    brave
    un-malicious
    serene
    soft-spoken
Rama never rebuked when maligned
Rama was pleased with the smallest kindness
Rama forgave a hundred pettinesses
Rama was lord of himself
He conversed only with the pious
And with his superiors in age and wisdom
Rama
    was always first to welcome visitors
    always spoke sweetly
    was humble about his prowess
Rama
    never spoke an untruth
    honoured the learned
    loved his subjects

and was loved by them
Rama
was a Kshatriya
devoted to duty
as a path to heaven
Rama
eschewed frivolity
delighted in arguing
for and against
Rama
was young and energetic
a clear judge of character
Rama
mastered the Vedas and their ancillary branches
Rama
excelled his father in the science of bowcraft
Rama
knew Dharma
and Artha
and Kama
Rama
had an excellent memory
never revealed secrets
was thrifty when necessary
and generous as well
Rama
was alert and hardworking
praised the diligent
punished the gulity
and rewarded the innocent
Rama
wisely gathered revenue
justly spent income
discreetly suppressed violence
Rama
was a consummate horseman
an unequalled archer
a hero of the chariot
skilled in hand combat
incapable of defeat
by gods and anti-gods

Rama
was never jealous
never devious
never over-ecstatic
nor over-depressed
Such
was the glory of Rama
Even the earth desired him as her lord!

The representatives of the citizens of Ayodhya, the mahatma counsellors, the Brahmins and the army generals said to Raja Dasharatha, "Your son is extraordinary, Sire. You have ruled for many years, and you are now old. Your son is like Lord Vishnu himself. Appoint him prince regent. The intensity of his self-discipline makes him outshine the sun."

They supplicated him with palms joined in *anjali,* and Raja Dasharatha, pleased, replied, "It will be done. My beloved son Rama will be installed prince regent. This is the sacred month of Chaitra, the season, of flowering trees. Commence preparations."

After the citizens had left, Dasharatha consulted his ministers and said, "Tomorrow the constellation Pushya will be in the ascendant. Order the installation ceremony of lotus-eyed Rama for that day."

Instructing his charioteer and chief minister Sumantra to inform Rama, Dasharatha entered the inner apartments.

When Sumantra came to him, Rama asked, "What does my noble father desire?"

"His majesty wishes to see you, if you are free."

Rama hurried to the palace. He prostrated himself, with palms joined in *anjali,* in front of his father. Dasharatha raised him gently, embraced him warmly, offered him a seat, and said, "Rama, I have grown old. I have enjoyed all luxuries, I have performed many sacrifices, made large gifts of foodgrains, and distributed liberal guru-fees. You, my son, are the ideal heir I wanted. You have no equal. I have decided to install you heir-apparent tomorrow. This will be done when your brother Bharata is absent. Bharata is a man of dharma, and will obey you who are his elder brother, but even the best of good men are not always constant in their goodness. They have been known to act on impulse. You can go now."

Rama took leave of his father, and returned to his own palace.

Hurriedly, he came out again to visit his mother Kaushalya in the ladies' apartments. Dressed in silk, she was praying for his welfare in front of the house deity.

"Mother," said Rama, "my father wishes me to accept the duty of ruling his people. He is installing me prince regent tomorrow. My teachers have advised that Sita and I should spend the night fasting; this is father's will, too. Let whatever is necessary be provided for the rituals that have to be performed."

Tears of joy welled up in Kaushalya's eyes. She whispered indistinctly, "O my dear Rama! Child, may you live long! My fasting has not been in vain. Lotus-eyed Vishnu has answered my prayers. You were born under an auspicious star."

Rama turned to his brother Lakshmana, who was standing beside him with palms joined in *anjali,* and said, "Lakshmana, help me rule the earth. You are like my second self. This happiness that will be mine is more yours than mine. My pleasures become pleasurable, my royal life becomes livable only because of you."

Rama bowed to his mothers Kaushalya and Sumitra and returned to his palace to be with Sita.

And the main roads of Ayodhya
Were scattered with flowers
And the perfume of incense
By the rejoicing citizens;
And massive torches, tall as trees,
Turned night into day;
And there was noisy joy
At the crossroads;
And the city of Ayodhya, teeming with crowds,
Resembled the capital of Indra;
And the tumult was such
That the multitudinous capital swelled and sounded like the sea
Surging with wallowing whales
And serpentine sea creatures.

Queen Kaikeyi had a maid of unknown antecedents, by the name of Manthara, who had been with her from childhood.

Manthara climbed to the moon-white balcony of the palace one day and saw the city of Ayodhya ablaze with beauty.

So many colourful flags, so many celebrating citizens – the spectacle puzzled Manthara.

She approached Rama's nurse, who was dressed in white silk, and asked, "What has happened? Why is Rama's mother so joyfully distributing wealth everywhere? Why are the citizens of Ayodhya wild with ecstasy? What makes the king so happy?"

The nurse, brimming with joy herself, told the hunchback maid, "Don't you know tomorrow the Pushya constellation's in the ascendant – and our Raja Dasharatha is installing faultless Rama heir-apparent?"

Irritated, the hunchback hurried down from the balcony. Bent on mischief, and suspecting sinister motivation, Manthara went to Kaikeyi, who was lounging on a couch, and said "Fool! Is this a time to relax? Disaster stares you in the face. Wake up! Can't you see the flood of sorrow that's about to drown you? It's silly to be proud of your good looks when the king doesn't even care. Your good luck is about to dry up, like a river bed in the peak of summer."

Kaikeyi listened to the hunchback's harsh words. Fearing an intrigue, she asked worriedly, "What is the matter, Manthara? Why are you so upset?"

The gentle manner of Kaikeyi's questioning made Manthara resort to fresh cunning. She was shrewd in speech; with concealed ill-meaning, she replied, "Devi, you are ruined! Raja Dasharatha has ordered that Rama be proclaimed prince regent! O Kaikeyi, I am so troubled. Your fortune is my fortune, your sorrow my sorrow. You are *so* innocent. Don't you realise how the king your husband has tricked you? He says he loves you, but his real love is Kaushalya. You are like a mother who fondly suckles a venomous snake. O you foolish woman, can't you see the snake at your breast? But now the truth is out. Raja Dasharatha has spurned you as he would a snake or an enemy. Sweet words – and sly deeds! By installing Rama he is insulting you. Act now. See through the trick – and save your son, save yourself, save me!"

Pleased with Manthara's words, ravishingly lovely Kaikeyi rose from her couch, radiant like the autumn moon. In gratified amazement, she placed a glittering jewel in Manthara's palm; then young Kaikeyi said casually, "This is welcome news indeed, Manthara. What better news could there be? I would like to reward you even more. I see no difference between Rama and Bharata. Rama heir-apparent! Heart-warming news! Your words are like nectar. Ask any favour, Manthara; I will refuse you nothing. You have made me so happy."

Manthara in a fury of sorrowful anger, flung away the jewel, and said, "Happy? Have you lost your senses? What is there to be happy about? Can't you see how you have been humiliated? Can't you see the danger that lies ahead? O Devi, it hurts me to see this happening to you; I feel like laughing hysterically when I see you happy when you should be sad. When Rama becomes regent tomorrow, it is Kaushalya who will be the happy queen, because her husband trusts her. And you – you will be no better than her maid then – and so will all of us. And your son will be Rama's slave. While the lucky ladies of Rama's house rejoice, your daughter-in-law and her friends will watch and weep."

Devi Kaikeyi resented the bitter censure of Manthara, but continued her eulogy of Rama's character.

"*He knows dharma.*
He speak the truth.
He is filled with every virtue.
He is grateful.
He is disciplined.
He is eldest prince.
He deserves the regency.
He will cherish his brothers like a father.
Why are you so agitated, hunchback,
Over his installation?
After Rama's regency is completed,
Bharata will inherit the throne.
Why are you upset. Manthara?
This is an occasion for celebration.
Surely you are intelligent.
Bharata deserves honour;
But so does Rama; more so.
Rama respects me even more than he does Kaushalya.
Rama on the throne
Is the same as Bharata on the throne –
Rama treats his brothers as his own self."

Manthara sighed deeply. There was pain in her voice as she said, "You are sinking in an ocean of misery, and you refuse to accept the fact. You are supremely stupid! Rama will rule; then Rama's son will become king. Bharata is nowhere. And here I am, trying to help you, and you don't understand. You reward me for bringing you news of the advancement of your co-wife! Listen to me: when Rama gets the throne, his first act will be to exile or execute Bharata. Why are you blind to the simple fact that Bharata is Rama's rival? Why can't you make out which lion is mauling which elephant? Why can't you understand that Rama's mother Kaushalya is a threat to you? She hates you, because her husband loves you more. Act before it's too late. Any way you can get Rama exiled, and Bharata crowned."

Kaikeyi half rose from her exquisite couch and said," Manthara tell me. Tell me how Rama can be removed and Bharata crowned."

"A long time ago," advised mean-minded Manthara, "during the pitched battle between the gods and the anti-gods, your husband attacked the city of Vaijayanta in the Dandaka forest, which was ruled by a rakshasa called Timirdhvaja, also known as Shambara. Shambara was the anti-god leader; he knew so many subtle strategies that even the gods were afraid to challenge him. It was he who had attacked first, and his midnight massacres had reduced the army of the gods, commanded by Indra, to helplessness. Valiant Dasharatha was severely wounded—his body was pierced with scores of missiles fired by the anti-gods. He fell down senseless and had to be removed from the field of battle. Remember, you saved his life then. And he was grateful, so grateful that he offered you two boons. Lovely lady, you said to him, 'I will claim them when I'm in need, 'to which the mahatma king replied, 'With pleasure.'I knew nothing about the promise until you told me later about it, and I have not forgotten it, because I wish your welfare. It's simple: redeem your boons. Ask your husband, first, to install Bharata, and second, to banish Rama for fourteen years. Fourteen years is enough for your son to win the love of his subjects. His sovereignty will then be secure. Daughter of Ashvapati, make up your mind. You will, today, enter the Chamber of Displeasure; you will go there in crumpled and soiled dress, you will lie down on the bare ground; you will sulk, you will refuse to look at the king or speak to him. He loves you. It will work. I haven't the slightest doubt. For you he will even enter fire. He cannot bear to see you angry; he will not refuse you. He will give his life for you, if it comes to that. Realise the force of your charms! Why are you so tardy? He will offer you jewels, gold, pearls, a wealth of precious things. Refuse them. Lovely lady, remind him of the two boons. Remind him of the war between the gods and the anti-gods and how you saved his life. Remember what you are after, and do not hesitate. No wavering! When he gently lifts you up, agrees to your request, insist: 'It is settled then – Rama exiled for fourteen years, and Bharata installed regent.' It is crucial that you say fourteen years, for time is needed to make your son firm in the hearts of the people. And demand Bharata's *immediate* regency. No compromise on these two points. Rama gone, your son will flourish; by the time Rama returns, your son will have nothing to fear – he will be surrounded by loyal relatives and friends, and the citizens will acknowledge him as the rightful ruler. Now is the right time. Act this very instant, and prevent the king from installing Rama regent."

Like a young girl beguiled, Kaikeyi fell victim to Manthara's insidious influence. She said in astonished admiration, "You have given me good advice: I will follow it. You must be the most intelligent hunchback in the world. You wish me well – I know it. Without you, I would never have guessed the real intentions of king."

Kaikeyi reclined on her couch like a flame glowing on an altar. Manthara replied, "No point building a dam after the river's in spate. Rise, lovely lady, do what is good for you – go immediately to the king."

The large-eyed Devi Kaikeyi rose and, accompanied by Manthara, went to the Chamber of Displeasure. Proud of her beauty, she took off her expensive pearl necklace and other ornaments. She lay down on the floor and said to Manthara:

"Either Rama goes into exile and Bharata becomes regent, or I die here and you will report my death to the king. I do not want gold and jewels. I will not eat. I do not want carpets, unguents, garlands, sandalpaste, eye salve. I will not eat or drink till Rama is exiled to the forest."

In the meantime Raja Dasharatha completed all arrangements for the installation of Rama, and returned to the palace. He thought: *Kaikeyi does not know yet. The installation will be over with today.*

Like the moon sailing into a mass of white cloud, not anticipating eclipse, the king entered the female apartments. He called for Kaikeyi but there was no answer. She had never before been absent when he had wanted her.

He summoned the doorkeeper and questioned him. With palms joined in *anjali* the doorkeeper, trembling, replied, "Sire, the queen is angry. She has gone to the Chamber of Displeasure."

Confused and agitated, the king hurried to the Chamber of Displeasure where he found Kaikeyi, whom he cherished more than life itself, supine on the ground, like an *apsara* fallen from heaven, like a torn creeper, an ensnared fawn. The infatuated monarch caressed his wife whose eyes were as large as lotus petals, and asked:

"Devi, you cannot be angry with me.
Tell me, who has hurt you?
Who has shown you disrespect?
Beloved, why are you lying in the dust?
So long as I am here.
Why must you look like one possessed?
I have doctors eager to please me –
They will attend on you.
Tell me what is wrong, dearest.
Do you want someone rewarded?
Do you want anyone punished?
Kaikeyi, my shy and lovely one,
Tell me everything.
I will dispel your sorrow
As the morning sun scatters mist."

To the king, pierced by the arrows of the god of love and a slave of passion, Kaikeyi replied bluntly, "No one has insulted me, my lord. No one has shown me disrespect. It's simply that I want you to do something for me. Promise first that you will not refuse, and I will tell you."

With loving hands the maharaja smoothed her hair; he smiled and said softly, "You know I love no one more than you, except Rama. An hour without Rama makes me restless. In the name of Rama, therefore, tell me. In the name of Rama, whom I love more than I do myself and my other sons, I ask you to tell me. I swear I will do what you want. I swear by all the good deeds I have done that I will do what pleases you."

Eagerly and joyfully, realising that the time was ripe, Kaikeyi spoke her terrible words – as terrible as Death waiting on one's doorstep:

"Bear witness, O thirtythree gods!
O twelve Adityas, bear witness!
Bear witness, eleven Rudras!

Eight Vasus and twin Ashvinis,
Bear witness!
Sun and Moon and Sky and the planets,
Night and day, and the four quarters,
The universe, bear witness!
Gandharvas and rakshasas,
Night-spirits, spirits of the ancestors,
House deities, all creatures everywhere,
Bear witness!
My illustrious lord, wise in dharma,
Follower of truth, has agreed
To honour my desire."

"Do you remember, my lord," continued Kaikeyi,"the battle between the gods and the anti-gods, when you were wounded and left for dead? Do you remember how I ministered to you, keeping awake all night in order to save your life? Remember the two boons you promised me then? I will claim those two boons today, my lord. First, in place of Rama, install Bharata regent. Second, exile Rama for fourteen years of penance in the forest. You are a raja of rajas. You know that word given should be word kept."

Kaikeyi's ultimatum bewildered and distressed the maharaja. *Is this a day-dream?* he thought. *What is happening? Have I lost my senses? Am I recalling something from my past birth? Is my mind diseased?*

He felt like a deer who suddenly confronts a tigress. He sat down heavily on the ground, like a vencmous snake petrified in a mandala by mantras.

He murmured faintly,"Aho! It's shameful!"

But even in his agony, anger flamed up inside him, and he said to Kaikeyi:

"Vicious woman,
Must you destroy our dynasty?
What have Rama and I done to you
That you should behave like this?
Rama loves you as his own mother—
Why are you bent on harming him?
No, I will not do it!
Rama is my son, my very dear son,
I cannot live without Rama.
I can abandon Kaushalya and Sumitra,

But not Rama. Never!
Has Rama ever spoken a single harsh word?
How can I banish him then?
Rama has shown dharma, truth, forgiveness,
Gratitude, compassion, duty, gentleness.
I am an old man, Kaikeyi,
I do not have long to live;
I beg of you, don't ask me to do this.
have pity.
Take all the wealth of the sea-circled earth,
I will gladly give it to you.
But not this.
For this is like death to me.
O Kaikeyi, with plams joined in anjali *I ask,*
I touch your feet with my head.
Save Rama!
Save me from doing adharma."

Like a madman Dasharatha groaned. He said :

"*Shame on all women!*
They are wicked by nature,
Perverse, selfish creatures!
—No!
I do not mean all women,
I mean only the mother of Bharata.
What you demand is immoral.
I will not grant it!
Shout!
Scream!
Take poison!
Dive into the bowls of the earth!
Do what you like—
You are vicious,
You are a disgrace to your father.
Threaten all you like—
I will not honour you!"

He tottered and collapsed like a frail creature in front of the woman who had ensnared his heart. He saw her feet in front of him; but he was unable to touch them.

Maharaja Dasharatha sprawled shamelessly on the ground, like

King Yayati fallen from heaven after the exhaustion of his good karma. Cruel Kaikeyi remained obdurate. "You have always, Maharaja," she said, "described yourself as a truth-speaker, a man of your word. What makes you break your word now?"

Dasharatha writhed like a bullock struggling to escape its yoke, and blurted out:

"*Wicked woman,*
I spurn you!
I spurn the hand I clasped
In front of the sacred fire!
I spurn you as a wife,
I spurn your son!"

Next morning the king's chief counsellor, Sumantra, entered the royal bed-chamber, extolling the virtues of the Raghu dynasty. He paused behind the door and chanted:

"*Holy night has passed,*
Auspicious day is here.
Awake, my lord!"

Recognising Sumantra by his manner of chanting mantras, Raja Dasharatha said, "Bring Rama here immediately."

Sumantra hurried to Rama, who shone like the sun. He did *anjali* and said, "Noble Rama, revered son of Kaushalya, your father and Queen Kaikeyi desire to see you urgently."

Rama from a distance saw his father seated on a luxurious couch, with Kaikeyi beside him; Dasharatha looked dejected and haggard.

He touched his father's feet and then Kaikeyi's, honouring them with complete composure. Dasharatha mumbled inaudibly, "Rama"; then tears filled his eyes and he could neither see nor speak.

Rama thought : *What makes my father so dispirited? Even when angry, he was always delighted to see me come. What is so unusual today?*

Turning to Kaikeyi, he asked, "My father loves me—I know it—why then has my arrival made him so depressed? Have I unknowingly offended him in any way? Why is he silent?"

Kaikeyi bluntly replied to mahatma Rama, "The raja is not angry. He is not depressed. There is something in his mind he does not dare tell you. He loves you, he does not want to displease you.

A long time ago he gave me two boons. He now regrets them. Any man would. He promised me, 'I will give you anything you ask.' Now he is not so sure. He's like a man who builds a dam too late – after the river has run dry.

"*Listen to me, Rama:*
The root of Dharma is Truth.
Let him not abandon Truth.
Act honourably, Rama.
Whether it pleases or displeases you,
I will tell you all.
I must, for he will not."

Rama, deeply hurt, said, "Devi, it is shameful that you could even think that I would not be obedient to my father. Do not say these words to me! What is the king's desire? Tell me. I will do it. I give you my word. Rama does not have to repeat what he promises. Once is enough."

Kaikeyi said,"I have asked the raja to install Bharata regent today, and banish you. After renouncing the throne, you will be in the forest fourteen years in the garb of an ascetic, with matted locks and tree-bark dress."

Rama heard Kaikeyi, and remained calm. But Raja Dasharatha shook with grief.

Rama listened to Kaikeyi's death-like words and said serenely, "So let it be. I will honour the promise of my father. I will go into forest exile, a matted-haired and dressed in tree-bark. I will do anything for my guru, for my father, for my friend, and for a person to whom I'm indebted. Only one thing hurts me – why did my father not tell me himself about Bharata's installation? I would gladly have given Sita, the kingdom, my life and my possessions to my brother Bharata. Why is my father weeping? Comfort him. I have accepted his command and I go gladly into exile in Dandaka forest."

Kaikeyi, delighted, pressed Rama to depart immediately.

"It is agreed then,"she exclaimed. "Send messengers to bring Bharata here from the house of his maternal uncle. As for you, Rama, I would advise speed. Leave this instant for the forest. Ignore the king's silence; he is perplexed and paralysed. Do not mind if he does not speak. Until you leave, your father cannot bathe or eat. That is a condition."

The raja sighed deeply.

"O the shame! The pain!" Dasharatha moaned, and fell in a faint on the gold-carved couch.

Rama did *pradakshina* around the sacred articles assembled for his installation and left, without once looking back.

Kaushalya Devi had passed the night observing religious rituals, and was engaged in offering puja to Vishnu for the welfare of her son. She was wearing silk, and peacefully worshipping Agni by chanting mantras.

Rama entered, and spoke:

"Devi, a calamity has struck Sita, Lakshmana, and you. What I am going to say will pain you. No, do not offer me this luxurious cushion to sit on. I am going to the Dandaka forest, where I will sit on a *kusha*-grass mat. The king is installing Bharata regent, and exiling me for fourteen years."

Kaushalya trembled like a plantain tree. Rama steadied her.

"O Rama my son," she said,"would that I had been barren, I would not have felt this sorrow then. The barren woman has only one grief – she is childless – that is all – she has no other regret. I never knew physical pleasure with my husband. My happiness lay in your happiness, my son. And I hoped, and I waited. And now – what will my younger co-wives say, what unkind words will I not hear in the inner apartments! Better I were dead than this!"

Seeing Kaushalya grieving. Lakshmana said to her, "It is not pleasing to me either, noble lady, that Rama should be ordered into exile."

Turning to Rama, he said, "The people still know nothing of this. Take my help. Overthrow the king and rule in his place. Our father is now our enemy. Capture him, kill him if necessary. If a guru or a father forgets the difference between what should be done and what should not be done, he should be disobeyed. Devi, witness my valour. Rama, witness it too. I will kill this senile father who lusts after Kaikeyi. He is beneath contempt."

Kaushalya listened to noble-minded Lakshmana and said tearfully to Rama, "You hear what Lakshmana says, my son? If you think it right, do it! Do not obey the command of my co-wife and abandon me to grief. You who know dharma, do not forsake me! You who wish to follow dharma, what dharma can be greater than that?"

Stable in dharma, Rama answered his weeping mother with words of dharma,"I cannot disobey the command of my father. I bow my head to you, mother, and I ask your leave to go to the forest."

To Lakshmana, Rama said, "Nothing is higher in this world than dharma: and truth is the root of dharma. Take shelter in dharma. Be a good Kshatriya. Give up mindless violence."

Then, with head bowed low and palms folded in *anjali*, to Kaushalya, "Grant me leave, mother. I promise you that I shall return after my father's terms are fulfilled."

Consoling his mother, firmly restraining his younger brother, determind to accept exile to the Dandaka, Rama respectfully circumambulated Kaushalya and left.

But Lakshmana pondered the matter deeply, and swung from extremes of dejection to extremes of approval. He frowned, he swayed his hands like an elephant's trunk, he shook his head right and left; he looked at Rama from the corner of his eye and said:

"*You've chosen the wrong time, brother,*
To reject the path of adharma
Simply because you fear the people's censure.
You are a Kshatriya, are you not?

Does a Kshatriya extol fate's inevitability?–
It's useless, cowardly, pitiful.
I'm surprised you don't distrust the two of them.
Don't you know cheats put on masks of dharma?
There is still hope.
Trust in me.
My sword is not a toy,
My arrows are not firewood,
They are meant to rout my enemies.
Take over the throne – I am on your side.
Command me as you would a slave."

Rama pacified Lakshmana and said, "Listen, young brother, my mind is firm. I will obey my father. That is the path of truth."

Rama's mother tried to persuade her firm-in-dharma son to take her with him. "My dear son, what will I do here? Let me follow you, like a cow following her calf, wherever you go."

"Tricked by Kaikeyi, and deserted by you," Rama replied, "the king will die. It is wrong for a wife to leave her husband. She must not even think of it. This is the eternal Dharma. A husband must be looked after by his wife as long as he lives."

Kaushalya smelt his head and embraced him,"Go in peace, my son. I shall wait for you in Ayodhya."

He touched her feet.

She kept looking at him.

Glowing with the radiance of a mother's blessings, he went to Sita's apartments.

"Sita," Rama said,"my father has exiled me to the forest. You come from a noble lineage, you know dharma, you have always followed the path of dharma. I must go. Stay back, my dearest, *priya*, and obey the king my father. Listen to Bharata and observe the sacred rituals. Lovely one, I have no choice but to go. Take my advice and see that you do nothing that offends anyone in any way."

Sweet-speaking Sita replied softly to her husband,"Rama most excellent of men, my husband, what words are these that make me more ashamed than amused?

I will go with you.
I will eat after you have eaten.
I will live on roots, shoots, and fruits.
I will not displease you.
I will walk ahead of you.
I will gaze at the hills, lakes, and rivers.
I will be secure in your care.
I will enjoy swans and lotus-filled ponds.
I will not tire, my large-eyed lord,
No, not for a hundred thousand years.
I do not want heaven
If that heaven does not have you in it.
I love you, and only you,
I will die without you."

Rama took her in his arms and tried to reassure her with these consoling words:

"Devi, how can I be happy
If I make you unhappy?
Heaven is not worth having
If you are unhappy.
I will abide by dharma
And you will abide with me.
Since your mind is made up,

My mind is made up too.
Distribute your jewels among Brahmins,
And food among the needy.
Hurry!
Donate my dresses and clothes,
My counches and chariots and other luxuries
To servants and dependants."

Lakshmana heard the conversation between Rama and Sita. His face was wet with tears. He bowed at his brother's feet, and held on to them tightly.

"Since you are determined to enter the deer-and-elephant-haunted forest,"he said,"take me with you. I will lead, bow in hand. I will gather roots and fruits for you. You and Sita will discover delight in the hills, and I will attend to your daily needs. When you are sleeping or awake, I will guard you."

Rama replied happily,"Come then, Lakshmana. But first say farewell to your friends and kinsmen."

After donating their possessions to Brahmins, Rama, Sita and Lakshmana went to their father Dasharatha.

Crowds watched them pass from seven-storeyed buildings. The hearts of the citizens were filled with sorrow at the sight of the three.

Lotus-eyed, dark-blue-skinned Rama said to his suffering father:

"I have come to take leave, father.
You are the maharaja:
Be gracious and bless us.
Allow Sita and Lakshmana to accompany me –
They will not have it otherwise.
I have tried,
But they are firm."

As he prepared to leave, Raja Dasharatha embraced his sons and fell on the ground in a faint. Rama refused an escort, saying, "When I have renounced everything, why do I need an armed escort? What will I do with trappings when I have given away the elephant? All I need is a dress of tree-bark such as ascetics wear in the forest – and a spade and a basket – and that will suffice for my fourteen years' exile."

Shameless Kaikeyi herself procured the tree-bark dress and offered it to Rama in the midst of the entire assembly, saying, "Wear this."

Rama accepted the two pieces—a loin-covering and a body-garment—and removed his costly robes. Lakshmana also discarded his expensive dress, and put on the ascetic garb.

Sita, who was dressed in silk, exclaimed in startled tones, "How do ascetics put these on?" She accepted the *kusha*-grass garment from Kaikeyi and her eyes filled with tears.

She tried repeatedly to fasten the ascetic garment and failed. She draped one end round her neck and another over her waist; it slipped. Rama quickly stepped forward and helped her drape the garment over her elegant silk robe.

Kaushalya embraced her daughter-in-law Sita and affectionately smelt her head.

Rama, Lakshmana and Sita did *anjali* to Raja Dasharatha and respectfully circumambulated him. Cheerfully Sita climbed into the chariot: she looked radiant in that sun-dazzling vehicle.

Confusion and tumult in the city of Ayodhya—throngs of bewildered men and beasts—elephants trumpeting while rutting juice streamed down their temples—horses whinnying—an incredible cacophony! The entire populace clamouring after Rama, like a parched man running after water...

Kaushalya stumbled after the chariot, like a cow seeking a newborn calf tied to a stake. Rama kept looking at his mother as she swayed in and out of the teeming crowd, sighing, "Rama, Rama! *Hai* Sita! Lakshmana!"

Raja Dasharatha shouted, "Stop!"

Rama cried, "Forward!"

The charioteer Sumantra, puzzled, did not know what to do.

Rama said "when the king scolds you, say, 'I could not hear you, sire.' "

One of the ministers of Dasharatha advised, "If one wishes a person to return, one should not accompany him too far."

Rama travelled till he came to the enchanting banks of the Tamasa river. He journeyed all night, covering a large distance. He performed his ritual devotions at the morning twilight, and hurried on, though it appeared to him that the splendid horses were moving far too slowly.

He crossed the sacred waters of the Vedashruti, and reached the territory in the south where Agastya lived. Then, entering the vast and enchanting territory of the Kosalas, Rama paused. He turned and, facing Ayodhya, with palms joined in *anjali* he addressed his capital:

"*Farewell, lovely city,*
protected by Dasharatha!
Farewell, gods of Ayodhya,
guardians of the city!
I will see you again
when I meet my parents
After fulfilling the promise
made by my father."

After Kosala, Rama came to a smiling and prosperous land redolent with gardens of bewitching beauty.

Here he saw
The three-worlds-flowing Ganga,
Weedless, cool-waved Ganga loved by sages,
Ashram-sprouting Ganga
In whose transparent waters apsaras *sported,*
Ganga of gods, gandharvas, and anti-gods,
Ganga meandering through heaven,
River of celestial lotuses,
Holy river, holy river, holy river,
Roaring, reverberating river,
River smiling with teeth of white foam,
Freely-flowing river faring forward,
River curving like a girl's plaited hair,
River of wayward whirlpools and placid places,
Noisy river, river of agitated waters,
Holy Ganga where gods bathe,
River replete with white lotuses,
Sweet with the cries of swans and cranes
And the plangent call of the chakravakas,
Tree-garlanded river,
Lotus-carpeted river,
Lily-lambent river,
River covered with pink pollen dust
Like a flushed love-lorn beloved,
Pearl-pure Ganga,
Sin-cleansing river.

Introduction

Lava and Kusha,
Twins sons of Sita,
Sang the *Ramayana*,
The story of Rama composed by Valmiki,
To the willing audience.
And the people sat and listened,
Enraptured they listened,
Their faces pearled with tears,
Like dew-dripping trees in a forest
On a windless morning.

KALIDASA: *The Dynasty of Raghu*
(Raghuvamsha, XV: 63-64, 66)

1. THE EPIC OF COMPASSION

Valmiki is honoured in the Indian tradition as the Adi-Kavi, or the First Poet, and so in a sense the Ideal Poet; and the *Ramayana* is the *adi-kavya* or the First and Ideal Poem. It is also a *kavya itihasa*, a "poem-history", an epic that imaginatively chronicles actual events after making allowance for whatever blurring and ambiguity are inevitable over a considerable passage of time.

A *kavya* starts with a benediction and a prologue that summarises the story; it is in verse; the plot develops smoothly with appropriate "joining-points"; the hero is super-human or divine; the dominant rasa is erotic (as in the *Ramayana)* or heroic (the *Mahabharata);* it includes the performance of miraculous deeds and magical episodes; the hero and heroine overcome moral trials and emotional tribulations; "love triumphs, truth prevails, duty is done and the gods obeyed, and release obtained from the dread burden of *samsara* (transmigration)"; it describes the spectacle of life in its variety and complexity, and presents the beauty of nature as well; its style is dignified, inspiring, and pleasing.

All this information is easily enough obtainable from any respectable treatise on Sanskrit literature. The crucial question is: what is Valmiki trying to get across to his listeners and readers?

It was left to Mahatma Gandhi to explain it in its beautiful simplicity. In the "Epilogue" to his version of the *Ramayana,* C. Rajagopalachari (whose daughter married Gandhiji's son) recalls that on one occasion "Gandhiji and I were talking about a girl very dear to both of us."

Rajaji asked the Mahatma, "How did she get all these ideas and phrases of love without having read any of the present-day love stories?"

And Gandhiji replied, "But has she not read the *Ramayana*? Is the *Ramayana* not a love story too?"

Commenting, "This struck me as profound, " Rajaji adds quickly, "Then we turned to other matters."

The quality of Valmiki's *karuna* is indeed special, if we are to judge by the effect the chanting of the expoits of Rama has on Shatrughna and his companions when they halt briefly at Valmiki's ashram and are invited to listen to the epic story after they have finished eating. Listening to the "truth" of the narrative, says Valmiki, the "human-lion" *(purusha-shardula)* Shatrughna "sighed deeply again and again" and "tears streamed down his eyes."

The other heroes—all veteran warriors—listened also, with "bowed heads", and kept repeating, humbly, "How wonderful!" They are "soldiers" *(sainikah)* but they are so moved that they turn to each other, dazed, eyes washed with the miracle of intense vicarious compassion, and whisper:

> *kimidam ka cha vartamah kimetat svapnadarshanam*"
>
> ""What is this? Where are we?
> Is it a vision? Is it a dream?"

("Uttara-Kanda", 71:20)

2. THE HARD-CORE NARRATIVE

Book One : BALA-KANDA. (1) *Introduction:* A conversation between Valmiki and Narada, where Narada eulogises Rama and gives a bird's-eye view of the events of Books II to VI; the creation of the *shloka* by Valmiki; Brahma orders Valmiki to compose the

Ramayana; a table of contents of the *Ramayana;* two disciples of Valmiki sing the *Ramayana* in public places and before the court of Ayodhya. (2) *Dasharatha's Sacrifices*: First there is a description of Ayodhya and of the Horse Sacrifice; (then is given the *Putreshtiyajna,* i.e., sacrifice for obtaining a son, where clear reference is made to Vishnu's incarnation in Rama and his brothers). (3) *Rama's Birth and Youthful Exploits:* The birth of the four brothers is described, then how Vishvamitra arrives and goes away with Rama and Lakshmana. The encounter with Tataka, Maricha and Subahu is described. ((4) *Puranic Stories:* Vishvamitra's family-history is given; the descent of the Ganga, the churning of the ocean, Ahalya's deliverance, and the long story of how Vishvamitra became a Brahmin are given.) (5) *Rama's Marriage:* First the story of the breaking of the bow at Mithila, followed by the marriage of Rama and his three brothers, (the encounter with Parashurama), and the arrival in Ayodhya.

Book Two : AYODHYA-KANDA. Dasharatha, king of Ayodhya, had four sons. The eldest was Rama, son of Kaushalya. Lakshmana and Shatrughna were sons of Sumitra. Bharata was the son of his favourite queen, Kaikeyi, to whom he had given the privilege of any two boons which he promised to grant. As he was growing old he decided to instal Rama as heir-apparent to the throne. Manthara, the maid-servant of Kaikeyi, wanted to prevent this because she hated Rama, so she persuaded her mistress to ask for the two boons Dasharatha had promised. The first boon would be banishment of Rama to the forests for fourteen years and the second boon would be the installation of her own son Bharata as the heir-apparent. Dasharatha granted the two boons and Rama prepared to leave the city. Sita and Lakshmana both pleaded for permission to accompany him, and this permission was granted. So the exiles left the city in a southernly direction; after crossing the Ganga with the help of Guha they visited the ashram of Bharadvaja at Prayaga (Allahabad), crossed the Yamuna, and reached Chitrakuta where they built a hut. Soon after their departure Dasharatha died of grief. His sons Bharata and Shatrughna who had been absent from Ayodhya up to this time returned for the funeral rites. Bharata refused the throne and visited Rama in the forest. He pleaded with Rama to return and to rule, but Rama refused. After pleading in vain, Bharata returned to Ayodhya with Rama's sandals. These he placed on the throne as a symbol of Rama and he himself resided outside the city at Nandigrama, from where he attended to the government of the kingdom. Rama left Chitrakuta soon after Bharata's visit, (visited the ashram of Atri), and penetrated farther into the jungles towards the south.

Book Three: ARANYA-KANDA. (During this journey the demon Viradha is slain, and the exiles visit the ashrams of Sarabhanga, Sutikshana, and Agastya; they also meet the vulture Jatayu). Eventually Rama and his companions arrived at Panchavati and built a hut there. After this Shurpanakha, Ravana's sister, was mutilated by Lakshmana and the armies of the demons Khara and Dushana were defeated. Shurpanakha reported all this to Ravana and incited him to kidnap Sita. (At the request of Ravana the demon Maricha transformed himself into a golden deer and enticed Rama and Lakshmana away from the hut.) In their absence Ravana kidnapped Sita. The vulture Jatayu attached Ravana but was mortally wounded. Sita was placed in the Ashoka-vana, the garden of Lanka. When Rama and Lakshmana returned to find their hut empty and Sita missing, they immediately began their search for Sita. On their way they met the dying vulture Jatayu, killed the monster Kabandha, and visited Shabari in her ashram.

Book Four: KISHKINDHA-KANDA. Sugriva was exiled to the forest by his brother Vali. He sent Hanuman to Rama and Lakshmana and, after a test of Rama's strength had been made, made an alliance with Rama. While Vali was engaged in a duel with Sugriva, Rama shot him with an arrow and killed him. The throne of Kishkindha was restored to Sugriva. After the rainy season Sugriva sent Hanuman with some companions to the south to search for Sita. At first they found no trace of her and were on the point of despairing when they met Sampati, the brother of Jatayu. Sampati told them that his son Sluparshva had seen a dark-coloured man carrying a woman across the hill, travelling on foot. *(It is worthy of note that this passage shows that originally there was no question of an aerial chariot in which Ravana took Sita to Lanka; also the location of Lanka is somewhere in central India and certainly not in Sri Lanka, the latter location being due to later Buddhist literature.)* Sampati also told Rama and Lakshmana that the man was Ravana, the demon-king of Lanka, the city that lies across the waters at which they had now arrived.

The raja of this territory was Guha, a friend of Rama, a Nishada by birth. No sooner had he heard of the arrival of Rama in his kingdom than he marched out to greet him.

He embraced Rama and said, "My Kingdom is Shringaverapura, it is as much yours as mine. Treat it like a second Ayodhya. I am honoured to welcome an illustrious guest."

Rama returned Guha's embrace. "I am happy to see you and your family so well. I am grateful for your invitation and sorry I cannot accept it. I have taken a vow to dress in tree-bark and deer skin, and subsist on roots and fruits. All I need now is fodder for the horses; no more. They are Raja Dasharatha's favourites. It will please me to see them properly fed."

Guha ordered his followers: "See that the horses are provided plentiful forage and water instantly!"

Night departed; dawn came. Broad-chested Rama said to *shubhalakshana*, auspicious-marked Lakshmana:

"*It's sunrise.*
Gracious night has gone.
The black kokila sings, my brother,
I can hear the scream of the peacocks.
It's time for us to cross the Ganga,
Swift-flowing daughter of Jahnui."

The ruler of the Nishadas summoned his people and ordered, "Get a strong boat ready, with oars and a helmsman, to ferry Rama across the Ganga."

Rama said to Guha, "You have been very kind to me. "To Lakshmana he said," Let us board now."

They boarded the boat, taking their bows, quivers and swords.

The charioteer Sumantra approached dharma-knowing Rama and asked, palms joined in *anjali*, "*What shall I do?*"

Rama touched Sumantra with his right hand. "Return to Raja Dasharatha. Serve him faithfully. You have been of great help to us. We do not need the chariot now. We will proceed to the forest on foot."

Turning to Guha, Rama explained," It is not right for me to stay in your territory's forest, which is inhabited. I must live in a secluded ashram and practise *tapasya*. Bring me the milky sap of the banyan."

With the banyan sap Rama dressed his and Lakshmana's hair into matted locks, as ascetics do. Then he said to Guha, "It is difficult to rule a kingdom. Be vigilant. Keep your army, your forts, and your people in eternal readiness."

The two brothers killed four deer— a *varaha,* a *rishya,* a *prishata,* a *maharuru.* They sliced off the flesh suitable for eating after consecration, in order to feed themselves. They slept that night under a large tree.

Next morning, at the pure hour of sunrise, they journeyed to the confluence of the Yamuna and the Ganga. There, in a dense forest, they saw enchanting scenery, indescribably beautiful, unlike anything they had ever seen before.

Rama gazed at the flowering trees and said to Lakshmana, " Not far from Prayaga, where the Yamuna and Ganga meet, I can see puffs of billowing smoke, which means there is some hermit's dwelling close by. I can hear the thunderous music of two river-waters blending. And here are logs of wood chopped by wood-cutters...There must be an ashram very near."

They came to the ashram of *rishi* Bharadvaja, who advised Rama, " Go to Chitrakuta, which is sixty miles from here, and rich in honey, roots, and fruits. Wander with Sita in the hilly region of Chitrakuta, listening to the peacocks calling, and let the prolific rivers and cascading waterfalls enchant your eyes. You will be captivated. The call of the kokilas there will ravish your heart."

Passing the night in Prayaga, the two princes took leave of the *maharishi* and proceeded towards Chitrakuta.

Midstream, in a raft on the Kalindi river, Sita paid respects to the river deity, "Devi, goddess, ferry us to safety on the other bank!"

After crossing the Kalindi, they took a raft across the dancing-waved, tree-necklaced Yamuna: on its other bank was a giant, cool-leaved banyan, called Shyama.

Sita did *namaste* to the sacred tree: "I bow to you, great banyan! May my husband complete his vow! May we see Kaushalya and Sumitra again!"

Seeing Sita praying; Rama said to Lakshmana, " Proceed ahead with Sita. I will follow with my weapons. Present Sita whatever fruit or flower she admires. Make her mind happy."

Arriving next day in Chitrakuta, Rama said, "This is where we will stay. Mahatma sages live here."

They entered the ashram of Valmiki.

Dharma-knowing Valmiki received them, saying, "You are welcome. Stay as long as you please."

Rama said to Lakshmana, "Let us construct a fine wooden hut here. It is a lovely place."

In the enchantment of Valmiki's ashram in Chitrakuta near the Mandakini river, where birds chirrupped and deer scampered, Rama stayed and forgot the pain of his banishment from Ayodhya.

Raja Dasharatha recovered consciousness and questioned his charioteer Sumantra about Rama.

"I have done wrong," said Dasharatha.
"I came under Kaikeyi's spell,
Ill-born and ill-minded woman!
I rejected the advice of elders,
Counsellors, friends, merchants.
She obsessed me.
What else could it be, Sumantra?
Is it all destiny?
Did providence wish it to be so?"

Six days after the departure of Rama, Dasharatha said to Kaushalya at midnight:

"Gracious queen,
A man reaps what he sows –
Good deeds, sweet fruit;
Ill deeds, bitterness.
Only the absolute fool does deeds
Without thinking of their consequences.
A man who cuts down a mango grove
And waters palasha *flowers instead*
Will repent his deed at harvest time.
By banishing Rama,
I cut down a mango grove.
When I was young, once
I hunted along the Sarayu river.
I heard the plop of a pitcher.
I aimed at the sound,
Thinking it was an elephant.
I fired a snake-sharp arrow,
A human voice screamed 'Hai! Hai!
Who wants to harm a poor hermit?
On the banks of the Sarayu
Lay a blood-drenched boy.

'You have killed not only me,
'You have killed my old parents,' he said,
'For they are feeble and helpless.
Go, confess your crime to them.
No, do not fear: I am not a Brahmin.
My father is Vaishya, my mother Shudra.'
I plucked out the arrow.
He looked at me, and died.
I was afraid, but I went.
'You have returned, my son?' asked the father.
'Hurry, come inside the ashram.
Give me water to drink;
I replied as bravely as I could:
'I am not your son, O mahatma.
I am a Kshatriya,
My name is Dasharatha.
I have killed your son by mistake.
Before he died, he told me you were both blind.
Tell me, how will expiate my crime?
He replied:
'If you had not confessed,
Your punishment would have been heinous.
Take us to our son.'
They wept over the boy's corpse.
They offered the funeral water libations.
Immediately Indra descended,
And the boy's spirit ascended to heaven
In a celestial chariot.
His father said:
'Now kill me too, sir.
You have made me sonless.
I put this curse on you –
You made me suffer on account of my son,
You too will suffer on account of yours.'
He and his wife climbed the funeral pyre
And ascended to heaven.
Kaushalya, my dear queen,
I reap today the fruits of my crime.
I am dying, my wife,
I am dying of a broken heart.
I feel my senses ebbing away

Like the flame of an oil-less lamp.
I feel remorse devouring my strength
Like a river eroding its banks.
Hai *strong-armed Rama!*
Have you really gone away?
Have you gone, your father's beloved son?
Hai Kaushalya!
Hai Sumitra!
Hai Kaikeyi, ruin of my race!"

With these words, at midnight, in the presence of Kaushalya and Sumitra, grieving over the exile he ordered of his beloved son, Dasharatha died.

The city of Ayodhya was plunged into gloom.

Next morning the Brahmins of Ayodhya's court met in conclave to decide on the succession.

"This night has been a hundred-year night," they concluded. "The king is in heaven; Rama in exile, and with him Lakshmana; Bharata and Shatrughna are in the beautiful city Rajagriha, their mother's city.

Raja-less, a country is doomed.
Raja-less, grain remains unharvested.
Raja-less, sons disobey fathers,
Raja-less, lawlessness prevails.
Raja-less, lovers break vows.
Raja-less, rewards are refused.
Raja-less, charity is forgotten.
Raja-less, religious debates decline.
Raja-less, ownership disappears.
Raja-less, man exploits man.
Like rivers without forests,
Like cattle without a cowherd,
Is a kingdom without a king.
The eye strives for the good of the body,
The king strives for the good of the kingdom.
The king is truth,
The king is dharma.
Let us install another king,
Let us make young Bharata our new king."

दिल्ली रमण देवी, कल्याणी देवी स्मारक, पुस्तकालय
स्था:-२०३७
लाजिम्पाट

Vasishtha listened to the outcome of the deliberations, and advised his friends, Brahmins, and the royal ministers: "Illustrious Bharata is passing his days comfortably with his maternal uncle; his brother Shatrughna is with him. Order messengers on swift horses to bring the two brothers here. This should be done at once."

The messengers from Ayodhya galloped on exhausted horses into Rajagriha. Kaikeyi's son Bharata heard the summons, and prepared to leave. The words of the messengers, mixed with the image of his dream, revived fresh turbulence in his heart.

Tears came to his eyes as his chariot drove towards Ayodhya. Failing to find his father in the palace, Bharata hurried to his mother's apartments. Kaikeyi saw her son, and jumped up from her golden couch, happily welcoming him.

He touched her feet. She smelt his head, embraced him, seated him on her lap, and asked," How many nights have you been away from your maternal grandfather's home, my son? You must be very tired. Is your grandfather well?—and your maternal uncle Yuddhajit? How is he? Tell me about them."

" Seven nights, mother," replied Bharata. "They are all well. The messengers came, and I hurried back. Tell me, mother, where is father? I do not see him anywhere. He is not with you either, as he usually is. He must be with Kaushalya then."

Kaikeyi said, making the displeasing fact as pleasing as she could," The mahatma raja your father has gone the way all mortals must go, sooner or later."

Innocent Bharata, crushed with grief, muttered, " Hai, I am finished, " and lifting his arms, he fell on the ground.

Recovering his senses, he asked his mother, "Where is dharmatma Rama? Where are his brother Lakshmana and his wife Sita?"

As if supplying an agreeable piece of news, Kaikeyi said, "Rama, dressed in tree-bark, has gone to the Dandaka forest. Sita and Lakshmana have gone with him."

Troubled, Bharata wondered what dishonour Rama had brought on his family to deserve forest-exile. "But what did Rama do?" he asked." Did he steal a Brahmin's possessions? Did he kill an innocent man? Did he commit adultery? Why is my illustrious brother Rama banished to the Dandaka forest?"

Questioned by noble-minded Bharata, Kaikeyi (being, after all, a woman) disclosed everything. The whimsical woman was foolish enough to think herself as clever as a pandit.

"No," she said,
"Rama has not stolen from a Brahmin.
He has not harmed anyone, poor or rich.
He has not lusted for another's wife.
It is all my doing.
He was being installed regent,
So I forced his exile,
And demanded you be installed instead.
Unable to live without Rama,
The king died of a broken heart.
Listen, my dharma-knowing son:
Accept the throne of Ayodhya today!
No regrets!
Be firm!
Listen to the Brahmins led by Vasishtha.
Perform the king's funeral rites,
And be crowned the lord of the world."

Shaking with inconsolable grief, Bharata replied:

"What will I do with a throne,
With a father dead, and a father-like brother
Lost to me?
You have killed the king
And exiled my brother—
You have piled horror upon horror,
You have poured poison in an open wound!
You have come like death
To ruin my family.
When my father married you,
He thrust a flaming torch in his chest!
O that I had the strength of yoga
To refuse you,
Or intelligence enough to thwart you!
How could you be so vicious, mother?
It is the age-old tradition in our family—
The eldest son inherits the throne,
His brothers must obey him.
You know nothing of the dharma of rajas,
You know nothing of our royal tradition."

Accusing his mother, Bharata continued with mounting anger:

"Go, Kaikeyi, vicious woman!
You have violated dharma!
Weep!
Weep for me!
Take me as dead!
My father dead,
Rama banished,
My name tarnished–
It is all your doing.
You a mother
You are my bitterest enemy.
You are not the daughter of dharma-raja Ashvapati–
You are a rakshasi born to ruin us!
I will go to the forest too,
And bring Rama Back.
And you–punish yourself–
Leap into fire–go into Dandaka exile–
Hang yourself–throttle yourself.
Sinful woman, you have no choice!"

Like an arrow-pierced snake, sighing deeply, he fell; he lay on the ground like the multi-coloured flag of Indra toppled from its tall pole.

After a long time, he recovered and reproached his mother in front of the entire assembly of ministers:

"I have no desire to rule.
I do not want the throne.
My mother's wishes are not my wishes.
I did not know Rama was going to be regent.
I was away in a distant land.
Shatrughna was with me.
I have nothing to do with the exile
Of Rama, Sita and Lakshmana."

While Bharata was planning a journey to meet, Rama, Lakshmana,s younger brother Shatrughna said to him, "Rama who cared so deeply for the welfare of others has been sent into exile by the wiles of a woman. What happened to Lakshmana? Why was he powerless to help Rama?"

He had hardly finished when Manthara, the hunchback maid, appeared at the door. She was smeared with scented sandalpaste, loaded with jewellery, and wearing an expensively embroidered dress. She looked like a monkey entangled in colourful chains and ribbons.

The doorkeeper seized her and dragged her before Shatrughna, saying, " This is the wicked witch who sent Rama into exile; she is responsible for the death of your father. Punish her as you see fit!"

Infuriated, Shatrughna shouted in front of the palace inmates, " Watch how I deal with this foul-minded wretch!"

He gripped her hard, and slapped her violently. She staggered. He hit her with redoubled fury. Her friends fled helter-skelter, screaming, " He will kill us all! Let us run to the lady of dharma, Kaushalya. She will save us."

Manthara's jewels clattered on the floor; the palace glittered like an autumn sky spangled with star-gems.

Shatrughna was about to beat the hunchback again when Bharata stopped him.

Bharata said:

"*Control yourself, Shatrughna!*
She is a woman.
Forgive her.
No man must harm a woman.
I would have killed Kaikeyi myself
Except that I knew dharma-knowing Rama
Would never have forgiven me.
If Rama hears that you have killed Manthara,
He will never speak to you or to me."

At this, Shatrughna released the hunchback maid, she limped inside and fell at Kaikeyi's feet, sobbing and half-senseless.

On the fourteenth day the royal counsellors said to Bharata, " Rama has been banished to the forest with Lakshmana. Our guru and lord, Dasharatha, has gone to heaven. Accept the throne before some enemy decides to launch a surprise attack. The people are expectant. All preparations have been made. Only your consent is needed. Finest of men, Bharata, become our sovereign!"

Bharata did *pradakshina* around the objects of coronation; after the respectful circumambulation he said, " You are learned counsellors. You are aware of the tradition in our family—the eldest son has always inherited the throne. Rama is my elder, Rama will be rural. I will retire to the forest for fourteen years. Get ready a powerful army with its fourfold divisions. I have determined to go to the forest to persuade my elder brother to return."

The massive army was summoned. Bharata rose early next morning and, climbing into his dazzling chariot, sped forward to persuade Rama.

The creatures of the forest, seeing the army marching, fled; herds of deer and antelope, afraid of the chariots, horses, elephants foot-soldiers clambered up the hills and scurried along the river banks.

Bharata said to Vasishtha," This must be the place indicated by Bharadvaja. I can see Chitrakuta, the Mandakini river and, far away, like a huge blue cloud, the forest."

He ordered his soldiers to camp, and set out in the direction of column of smoke, faintly visible in the distance.

Rama was showing Sita the river that meandered at the foot of the mountain; he offered her a piece of meat, saying," This is delicious, superbly roasted; try it." Even as dharmatma Rama said this, there was a tremendous noise, and he heard the trumpeting of elephants running amok at the approach of Bharata's army.

He turned to Lakshmana." Find out the cause, Lakshmana. It seems to me it's some king out hunting in the forest."

Meanwhile Bharata, who had gone ahead, came to the spot. He saw Rama sitting inside a hut, dressed in deer-skin, his hair a mandala of matted locks. Rama shone with an indescribable radiance; he had the neck and shoulders of a lion, he was mighty-armed, his eyes were like lotuses; he was seated like a Lord of Dharma on a cushion of *Kusha* grass; beside him were Sita and Lakshmana.

Perspiration wet Bharata's lotus-like face. He fell down at Rama's feet, wanting to touch them, but unable to, so confused was he in the gush of fraternal feeling.

" O noble prince!" he cried out.

He could not speak any more.

Shatrughna fell at Rama's feet, weeping. Rama embraced them both.Rama's eyes filled with tears.

Bharata joined his palms in *anjali* and said to noble-minded Rama," Our father did what he was coerced to do; he has left us and gone to heaven, tortured to death by separation from his son. My mother Kaikeyi, to her great shame, has done all this. She is doomed to a terrible hell for her crime. I have come here to ask you a favour. Give us your consent to accept the crown. You cannot ignore all our supplications, noble brother."

"Do you really expect me, Bharata," replied Rama, "to do this sinful deed for the sake of a mere crown? I am nobly born, I believe in goodness and keeping one's word. And you should not condemn your mother. Elders are free to order their children. Surely you are aware of this."

Rama turned to Sita and said, "Your father-in-law is dead, Sita. You, Lakshmana, are fatherless. Bharata has brought us the sad news."

Rama noticed the affliction of Bharata; serenely he consoled Bharata with these words:

"*Man is not entirely free:*
Fate drives him here and there.
What progresses, declines,
What rises, falls,
Union ends in separation,
Life ends in death.
Ripe fruit fears fall,
Born man fears death.
Solid pillars decay, the house collapses,
Man totters into old age and death.
Night gone does not return,
The Yamuna's waters merge in the abundant ocean.
Death walks with us, and sits with us.
Travel abroad, Death goes with you.
When you return, Death returns too.
Why mourn the dead when you are dying too?
A man standing on a road
Sees a group of travellers pass—
'Wait!' he shouts. 'I'm coming too.'
We all follow the path of our fathers and forefathers.
Why mourn them?
It is everyone's road, everyone's journey,
The same road, the same journey.
A river connot return to its source,
There is no turning back in life.
Only a going ahead—only acts
That should bring happiness and peace.
No, Bharata, I cannot accept the crown.

I will follow the path of dharma:
I will obey the will of my father."

Turning to Rama, who shone with the dazzle of the sun and the moon, Bharata said:

"*Remove your gold-painted sandals, my brother.*
I ask you this
To ensure peace and safety for all."

Rama took off his sandals and gave them to Bharata. Bharata did *pranama* before the sandals.

"For fourteen years, I shall live here, "Bharata said to Rama." I will subsist on roots, shoots, and fruits, I shall wear deer-skin and matted locks. I will stay outside Ayodhya, ruling the kingdom in your name, with your sandals as symbols of your authority. I will wait for you. If you do not return after fourteen years, I will immolate myself."

"I shall return," said Rama, embracing Bharata.

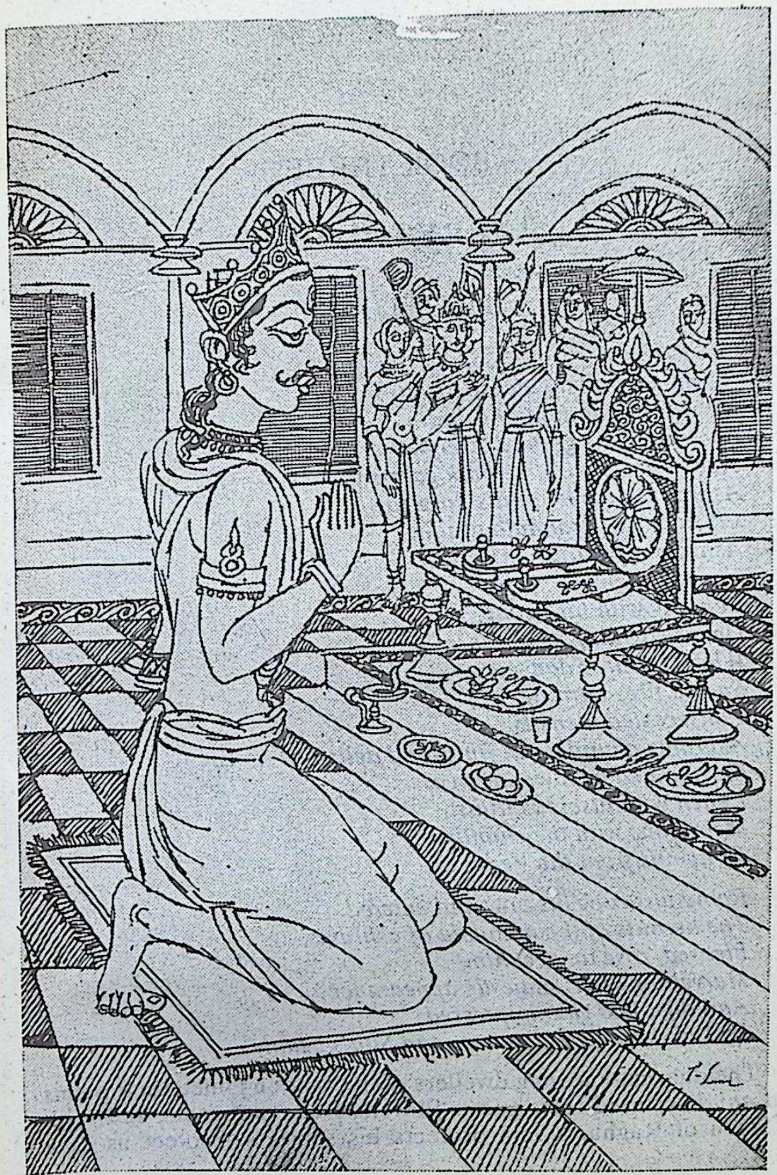
Turning to Shatrughna, he said, "In my name and in Sita's name, I adjure you to look after your mother Kaikeyi, and never to be angry with her."

Rama bid farewell to all, and entered his hut.

Bharata, helped by his ministers, ruled the kingdom from Nandigrama. he lived as a hermit, in tree-bark dress and matted locks.

He placed Rama's sandals on the consecrated dais, covered them with a royal canopy, and personally fanned them with yak-tail *chowries*. He administered government in the name of Rama, submitting every business of state first before the sandals, and every gift as well.

Rama entered the forest of exile with Sita and Lakshmana like the sun entering a massive conglomeration of dark clouds.



BOOK THREE

Aranya-Kanda

THE FOREST

Rama entered the dense forest.
He saw a mandala of ashrams;
Spread on the ground, everywhere
Kusha *grass and tree-bark garments.*
Ashrams where hermits dazzled
Like the sun-mandala itself...
Ashrams spacious and clean,
Havens of peace
Echoing with bird-song,
Deer-delighting ashrams
Where apsaras danced...
Sacred fires burning,
Consecrated utensils,
Ashrams abundant in fruits and delicious roots,
Surrounded by towering trees
Laden with luscious fruits,
Melodious with the chanting
Of hymns from the Vedas...

Rama unstrung his bow and entered.
The hermits of the mandala of ashrams,
Pleased, rose to greet him,
Marvelling at his majestic appearance
And dignified gait, impressed
By Lakshmana's grandeur, and Sita's beauty.

The dharma-knowing dwellers of the ashram joined their palms in *anjali*, offered their guests flowers, fruits and roots, and said, "Scion of Raghu, a raja protects his subjects. Protect us as a mother protects the child in her womb.

Accepting their hospitality, Rama passed the night in the ashram. At sunrise he, Lakshmana, and Sita entered the heart of the forest, filled with deer, boars, and tigers.

Trampled trees,
Crushed creepers,
Uprooted bushes,
Muddied pools,
No birds singing,
Only the chirp of crickets...
Rama plunged ahead,
Followed by Lakshmana
And timid Sita.
Suddenly he saw
A hill-huge creature,
A weird monster,
A hideous beast
With sunken eyes,
Fearful, clad in
Bloodstained tiger-skin,
Wide-jawed, horrendous
Like the god of death,
Roaring and screaming.
From his spear dangled
Heads of three lions,
Four tigers, two wolves,
Ten spotted deer,
And a tusked elephant
Dripping with blood...

Seeing Rama, Lakshmana, and Sita,
He charged headlong
Like killer Kala,
Devourer of the worlds
On the day of doom...
With an earth-shaking yell,
He scooped up Sita
And, standing afar, declared:
"I am a rakshasa,
My name is Viradha,
This is my forest.

I am armed, I crunch
The flesh of hermits.
This lovely lady
I will make my wife.
As for you, wicked trespassers,
I will drink your blood."

Janaka's daughter Sita
Heard the rakshasa,
And trembled like a plantain tree
In a fierce storm.

The hideous voice again
Filled the forest:
"Who are you?
Why are you here?"
"Two Kshatriyas," replied Rama.
"Passing through the forest.
Why do you obstruct us?"

"I am Viradha,
My father is Java,
My mother Shatahrada.
Through the grace of Brahma,
My tapaśya was fruitful.
He gave me a boon
That makes me invulnerable
To any earthly weapon.
You cannot kill me!
Leave
Leave now!
Or die at my hands!
Leave the lovely lady
And run!"

Instantly, Rama decided
To kill the rakshasa.
Lakshmana snapped his left arm,
Rama his right.
That cloud-mass of rakshasa,
Arm broken,
Toppled like a hill hit by lightning.

The brothers jumped on him,
Pummelled him,
Lifted him, hurled him back on the ground,
Kicked him,
But failed to kill him.
Noticing his invulnerability,
Saviour-of-all Rama
Said to Lakshmana:
"He has a boon
By the strength of his tapasya.
No weapons can harm him.
Dig a pit, Lakshmana,
Quickly,
Large enough for an elephant."
Saying which, Rama waited,
His foot on the rakshasa's neck.

Hearing Rama's command,
The rakshasa cringed:
"O tiger among men!
O Indra-strong mortal,
I am dying.
I did know who you were.
You are Kaushalya's son,
You are Rama.
And this is gracious Sita,
And this is famous Lakshmana.
I am no rakshasa,
I am the gandharva Tumburu.
I lusted for the apsara Rambha,
So Raja Kubera cursed me,
'When Rama kills you,
You will revert to gandharva-hood.'
I am grateful, O foe-crusher,
You have redeemed me,
My curse is over."

Lakshmana dug a large pit.
The rakshasa shrieked.
The rolled the conch-eared monster
Into the gaping hole.

Rama went to Sita,
And embraced and consoled her.

Sita said gently and lovingly:
"Even a noble man
Can subtly slip into adharma:
With passions controlled, however,
There is less chance.
Kama is of three kinds, my husband:
One leads to lying;
The other two are worse:
Lusting for another's wife,
And needless cruelty.
You have never—you never will—
Speak a lie, my lord.
You cannot lust for another's wife,
It is so destructive of dharma;
You never did, you never will.
You cannot even think it, Rama,
You love your own wife so deeply.
You are firm in Dharma,
You are rooted in Truth.
My husband, my darshan-*gracious lord,*
The third kind of passion
Has taken hold of you—
Needless cruelty, senseless enmity.
Brave husband,
You have vowed to kill the rakshasas
In order to protect the sages.
Armed with bows and arrows,
You and your brother Lakshmana
Scour the Dandaka forest...
I see you stride ahead,
But my mind is uneasy,
I worry for your welfare.
I do not like it—
I do not like your mission in Dandaka.
I will tell you why.
Listen to me, my husband.
You are armed with bows and arrows,
You enter the forest,

You see innocent creatures straying,
Won't you be tempted to shoot?
A bow is to warrior
As faggot is to fire.
A long time ago,
In a bird-and-deer-filled forest,
At a holy place,
There lived an ascetic.
To frustrate his tapasya,
Indra, disguised as a warrior,
Entered the forest, sword in hand.
He left the sword in trust
With the meditating ascetic –
Which the pious man accepted,
Always keeping a watchful eye on the sword
Wherever he wandered in the forest.
He was so conscientious
He took the sword with him
Even when gathering roots and fruits.
Till it so happened
That he decided to abandon his tapasya,
For his mind was always on the sword.
Slowly,
Unknowingly,
He slipped into adharma,
He found pleasure in violence,
He descended into the hell that is cruelty.
And all because of the sword,
Because of his association with the sword.
To be always with weapons
Is to be always near fire.
I love you, my husband,
So I say this.
You are always armed.
I beg of you,
Do not kill the rakshasas
Of Dandaka forest indiscriminately.
The world will never forgive such slaughter.
From Dharma comes success,
From Dharma comes happiness,
Dharma brings everythings,

Dharma is the world's essence.
The wise discipline and control themselves
They discard pleasure,
Pleasure is not the way to Dharma.

But why should I say all this?
I am only a woman,
I cannot be very serious.
Who am I to teach you Dharma?
If you find it reasonable,
Give it a little thought, my husband,
And do as you think best.
There is no time to lose."

Rama, firm in Dharma,
Heard the advice of his devoted wife
And said:
"Daughter of Janaka,
Lady learned in Dharma,
Devi,
Because you love me
You have offered advice
That will lead to my welfare.
It is natural for you to do so.
Devi,
What can I say?
You yourself said that Kshatriyas carry arms
To succour the distressed.
I have vowed to protect
The holy sages of Dandaka forest.
I cannot go back on my vow.
I am firm in truth.
I will give up my life,
I will give you up, Sita,
I will give up, Lakshmana,
But I will not break a promise
I have made to Brahmins.
I would have protected the sages
Even if I had not taken a vow–
Now even more so.
You have made me happy, Sita:
Only a person who loves a person

Advises that person.
Your words suit you,
They suit your family too, lovely lady.
You are my sa-dharma,-charini,
My companion in dharma,
I love you more than life itself."

Mahatma Rama, wielder of the bow,
Said this, and proceeded to panchavati.

On his way to Panchavti, Rama came across a giant, extraordinarily powerful vulture.

Rama and Lakshmana both thought him to be a rakshasa; they asked, "Who are you?"

Gently and sweetly, the bird replied, "Child, I am a friend of your father." He continued, "I am Aruna's son. My lineage goes back to the primal world-creators, the Prajapatis. My name is Jatayu. Dear child, if you so wish, I will stay near you. When you and Lakshmana are away, I will keep watch over Sita."

Rama was delighted to hear of Jatayu's friendship with his father Dasharatha. He bowed to Jatayu and embraced him warmly.

Accepting Jatayu's offer to guard Sita, Rama, Sita and Lakshmana proceeded to Panchavati. Jatayu accompanied them.

Reaching Panchavati, home of wild beasts and free-ranging deer, Rama said to his radiantly illustrious brother Lakshmana:

"We are in Panchavati, which the sage recommended for our stay. What a treasure of flowering trees! Look around, resourceful brother, and find a spot suitable for our ashram. There should be a pool nearby—water and greenery together create ideal beauty—and flowers and firewood and *kusha* grass easily available. That will be perfect for Sita, you and I."

One day, after bathing in the Godavari, Rama, Sita and Lakshmana returned to the ashram. They finished their morning devotions and entered the leaf-thatched hut. Rama was conversing with his wife and brother when a rakshasi happened to pass by.

Love-lorn, she said to Rama, "Who are you, in hermit dress, carrying bow and arrows? Why are you here in the land of the rakshasas?"

Rama unsuspecting, told her everything. "I am Raja Dasharatha's eldest son. My name is Rama. This is my brother

Lakshmana, this is my wife, daughter of the king of Videha. I come here in obedience to the will of my father to carry out the dictates of dharma. Who are you? Who is your father? Whose wife are you? You must be a rakshasi able to change form at will. You look lovely. Why have you come here?"

The love-stricken rakshasi replied, "Listen to me, Rama. I will tell you the truth. I am Shurpanakha, I am a rakshasi, I can change form at will. I live in this forest, I terrorise its creatures. I have a brother, Ravana. You have surely heard of him. I have a second brother, Kumbhakarna, who sleeps all the time. And a third, Vibhishana, who is a man of dharma. Two more brothers, Khara and Dushana, are skilled warriors. But I am greater than they. Ever since I saw you, Rama Purushottama, finest of men, I have desired you as my husband. I am strong; I can travel as I please, where I will. Be my husband. What good is Sita? She is deformed, she is ugly, she is not worthy of you. I am your ideal partner. Make me your wife. I'll devour this silly, flat-bellied female – and I'll finish off your brother too. Then you and I will sport on the peaks of ravishing mountains and make love in the forest of Dandaka."

Looking inside the leaf-thatched hut, she said "So this is the decrepit, deformed and dissolute flat-bellied wife you find so attractive? I'll gobble her up in your very presence! Rid of my rival, I'll roam the woods with you."

The flaming-ember-eyed rakshasi leapt upon fawn-eyed Sita, like a giant meteor hurtling at the planet Rohini.

Rama stopped her as she pounced, like death's noose, on Sita. He reprimanded Lakshmana, "Sita is in danger! Do something, quickly! Maim this big-bellied female monster."

Powerful Lakshmana pulled out his sword and, as Rama watched, sliced off the ears and nose of Shurpanakha.

With a horrifying scream, dripping blood, Shurpanakha fled into the forest, arms uplifted, howling in agony.

She rushed to her mighty brother Khara who was chief of a horde of rakshasas in Janasthana. She threw herself at the ground in front of him, like a bolt of lightning falling from the sky.

Frightened, faint from loss of blood which smeared her face and body, Khara's sister panted out details about Rama's arrival in the forest with Sita and Lakshmana, and how they had mutilated her.

Khara looked at his disfigured, bleeding sister writhing on the ground, and said, "Stand up! Collect yourself and tell me clearly what happened. Who disfigured you? Who has dared to touch a